

MOONLIGHT

Marcel Ray Duriez

[Duriez19@gmail.com](mailto:Duriez19@gmail.com)

## PREFACE

During the winter when I was fourteen, my mother thought I was going dumb, probably because I seldom left the house, spent so much time in bed, read the same book repeatedly, did not eat much, and took me so much to do anything I did not want to do. Little by little all my free time is spent thinking about death. Whenever you read a brochure or website about mental health or something else, they always list depression as a side effect of being hated. While in fact, depression is not a side effect of your surroundings. Depression is a side effect of death, you can say so, yet it is not.

School is also a side effect of death, and so are friendships. Everything. But my mom thought I needed treatment, so she took me to Dr. Paul, who agreed I was swimming in paralysis and clinical depression, so the medications had to be adjusted, and I had to be in a Weekly Support Group. The children in this support group you see every day at school are holes in the butt, featuring alternating characters in different states of mental distress is why the side effects are of death.

## 1 A Stalemate

Allow me to say this- existing as an idiot is no container of chocolate strawberries. Individuals chuckle, fail forbearance and dine you neglected. Currently, they say residents are supposed to be considerate to the tormented, though allow me to tell you- it is not forever that method. So, I obtained no criticisms because I suspect I did live a fascinating life.

I have been an idiot since I was handled by my masters. My IQ is near 74 yet was not beforehand when I was a smaller child, (yet my mind comes and goes,) so I had never presented extensively considered to how I would pass, though I had preserved logic sufficiently in the last occasional months, even if I kept, I would not carry out the pictured it like this.

This is the day my twin sister Nevaeh May was born on July 19, 1995. She had six sisters. I am known for her pigtails John Jackson pulled them in class and for being too shy and soft-spoken. Mr. Anderson takes the part of dad on the weekends. Is dating Nevaeh on and off as a 'that way' girl. Her hobbies include drawing, singing in her church's choir, and braiding her hair with ribbons that match her outfits. picked on by J.A Cowering. I had a half-sister Sarah who died in 1997 when Lily was 2 years old. Her half-sister Ava was born on November 19, 2000, when Lily

was 5 years old. Her sister Adriane was born in 2002 when Lily was 7 years old.

It is popular and I am not, end of the story there.

And being me, Lily is (Sped- ED!) the 'Individuals with Disabilities Education Act' girl. 'It's about the same as having a red, white and blue dick shoved up your ass and saying you have freedom of choices.'

Then some names and faces have fewer thoughts than I, like Candy Sheldon, Elizabeth Smith, Megan Davis, Taylor Brown, Joseph Shaw, Kassie Row, and even the teacher Miss. Stackawitz is a distraction to her and picks on her daily saying names of slander.

I gazed without respiring across the long room, into the dark eyes of the hunter, and he looked pleasantly back at me.

It stood an acceptable way to pass, in the place of somebody else, somebody I treasured. Dignified. That ought to matter for something.

I understood that if I had never gone ahead to McCarthy, I would not be meeting extinction now. While frightened as I stood, I could not convey myself to rue the determination. When life offers you an aim

so far exceeding any of your anticipations, it is not useful to sorrow when it reaches a stop.

The predator smiled pleasantly as he wandered onwards to annihilate me.

My eyesight extended to a glowing, white ray. I existed in an unknown room, a white chamber. The border beside me stood sheathed in extended-standing blinds; over my chairperson, the glaring sunlight overwhelmed me. I stood supported up on a tough, jagged mattress - a mattress with railings. The cushions were matte, clumpy, and wet. There was an aggravating beeping sound someplace tight by. I expected that suggested I stood still happening. Cessation should not be this hurting.

My fingers were all knotted up with transparent conduits, and something was taped across my facade, underneath my nose. I lifted my writing to yank it off.

'Na, you don't.' And nippy fingers grabbed my hand.

'Melvin?' I angled my head barely, and his exquisite countenance was merely my hairsbreadths length from mine, his chin catnapping on the periphery of my pad. I discovered furthermore that I

stood alive, now, with appreciation and joy. 'Oh, Melvin, I'm so miserable!'

'Sh- h,' he silenced me. 'Everything's all good now.'

'What occurred?' I could not recall unquestionably, and my mind mutinied against me as I tried to recall.

'I was too delinquent. I could have existed too delinquent,' he rumored, his spokesperson oppressed.

'I was so ridiculous, Melvin. I supposed he had my mother.'

'He fooled us all.'

'I need to call Charlie and my mother,' I discovered via the vapor.

'Naddalin Natalie called them, they were here - well, here in the infirmary. She is conveying something to swallow respectably currently.'

'She's here?' I tried to sit up, but the spinning in my skull revved, and his hand forced me gently down onto the cushions.

'She'll be back shortly,' he vowed. 'Nevertheless, you ought to stay motionless.'

'Despite what did you signify her?' I panicked. I had no welfare in my existing comfort. My mother was here, and I was recuperating from a predator invasion. 'Why did you inform her I'm here?'

'Lily, you fell down two breakouts of stairs and through a window at the high school.'

He remained. 'You have to recognize, it could transpire.'

I moaned, and it spoiled. I gazed down at my body beneath the sheet, the massive lump that was my leg, they were next needed to be amputated.

'How wrong am I?' I bid.

'You have a nonfunctional leg, four busted ribs, some fissures in your skull, contusions wrapping every hairsbreadth of your skin, and you have yielded a lot of blood. They offered you a few transfusions. I did not like it - it caused your scent all sinful for a bit.'

'That must include living a pleasant transition for you.'

'Nope, I like how you scent.'

'How did you do it?' I asked quietly. He understood what I suggested earlier.

'I'm not sure.' He glanced away from my wondering looks, lifting my gauze-wrapped hand from the mattress and harboring it gently in his, cautious not to disrupt the wire tying me to one of the monitors.

I stayed patient for the holiday.

He laughed without replacing my watch. 'It was unthinkable... to control,' he gossiped. 'Unbelievable. But I carried it out.' He darted up eventually, with half a smile. 'I must adore you.'

'Don't I taste as pleasing as I scent?' I grinned in answer. That damaged my face.

'Even more useful - more reasonable than I'd envisioned.'

'I'm miserable,' I apologized.

He lifted his regards to the roof. 'Of all the something to apologize for.'

'What should I apologize for?'

'For exact almost carrying yourself out from me permanently.'

'I'm miserable,' I apologized similarly.



'I understand why you did it.' His representative was enjoyable. The clan of girls, like blackbirds. 'It stood still ludicrous, of class. You should have remained for me; you should have informed me.'

'You wouldn't keep letting me move.'

'Na,' he arranged harshly, 'I wouldn't.'

Some extremely unwelcome recollections were forming to come about me. I jerked and then winced.

He was at once worried. 'Lily, what's wrong?'

'What happened to Ava?'

'After I pulled her off you, Dejen and Jae took care of her.'

There was a drastic note of shame in her representative.

This confused me. 'I didn't see Dejen and Jae there.'

'They had to escape space... there was a lot of blood.'

'But you survived.'

'Aye, I prevailed.'

'And Naddalin Natalie, and Melchor...' I said in amazement.

'They value you, similarly, you understand.'

A moment of heartbreaking photos from the last moment I noticed Naddalin Natalie reminded me of something. 'Did Naddalin Natalie visit the video?' I questioned anxiously.

'Yes.' A new voice darkened his voice, a tone of hatred.

'She was always in the dark, that's why she didn't remember.'

'I know she's in now.' His voice was even, but his face was black with anger.

I tried to reach his face with my free hand, but something stopped me. I looked down to see IV pulling my arm.

'Oh,' I winced.

'What is this?' He then asked anxiously - distracted, but not enough. The darkness did not completely leave his eyes.

'Needles,' I explained, looking at him from my hand. I focused on the curved ceiling tile and tried to breathe deeply despite the pain in my ribs.

'Afraid of needles,' he muttered to himself, shaking his head.

'Oh, a sad vampire, intending to kill her, sure enough, no problem, she ran

to meet him. On the other hand, IV...' my eyes. I was glad to know that this reaction was at least pain-free. I decided to change the subject.

'Why did you come?' I asked.

At first, he stared at me, confused, and hurt to touch his eyes. His cheeks scrunched up as he met his face. 'Do you want me to go?'

'No!' Shocked at the thought, I protested. 'No, I mean, why does mom think you are here? I need to get my story right before she comes back.'

'Oh,' he said, and his forehead went back to smooth marble. 'I came to Phoenix to talk some sense into you, to convince you to go back to the McAuley.' His wide eyes were so honest and sincere that I believed him myself. 'You agreed to see me, and you went to the hotel where I was staying with Melchor and Naddalin Natalie - of course I was here under parental supervision,' he put in politely. Room and ... well, you know the rest. You do not need to remember any details, but you have a good excuse to ramble a bit about the finer points.

I thought about it for a moment. 'There are a few flaws with that story. Like unbroken windows.'

'Not really,' he said. 'Naddalin Natalie had a remarkably interesting bit of creative evidence. Everything was taken very convincingly - you can sue the hotel if you want. You have nothing to worry about,' he promised me, caressing my cheek with light touches. 'Your only job now is to heal.'

I did not react to his touch because I was not too lost in the pain or the drug haze. The inspector's voice turned mischievously- now he was not the only one sensing my heart's misbehavior.

'That's embarrassing,' I said to myself.

He laughed, and a suspicious look came into his eyes. 'Hm, I wonder...'

He slowly leaned in; The sound of his screams got louder without his lips touching mine. But when they did, even with very gentle pressure, the sound stopped completely.

When the monitor reported my heart rate restarting, his anxiety turned to relief and then suddenly backed off.

'Looks like I'll have to be more careful with you than usual.'  
He frowned.

'I haven't finished your name,' I said. 'Don't make me come there.'

He smiled and leaned down to lightly press his lips to mine. The supervisor went wild.

But then his lips twitched. He pulled away.

'I think I can hear your mother,' he said, smiling again.

'Don't leave me,' I cried, an irrational wave of panic flowing through me. I could not let him go - he might be gone from me again.

For a brief second, he read the terror in my eyes. 'I won't,' he promised sincerely and smiled. 'I'll take a nap,' he said, moving from the rigid plastic chair next to me to the turquoise faux-leather armchair under my bed, leaning back and closing his eyes. He was perfectly still.

'Don't forget to breathe,' I said sarcastically. He took a deep breath, eyes still closed.

I could hear my mother now. She was talking to someone, a nurse, and seemed tired and upset. I jumped out of bed and ran to her, to reassure her, to promise that everything was fine. But I was in no shape to jump so I waited impatiently.

She peeked through the crack in the door.

'Mother!' Then at that moment, I whispered, my voice full of love and relief.

She took Melvin to the still-sitting chair and sat on the edge of my bed.

'He's not going, is he?' She muttered to herself.

'Mother, I'm so glad to see you!'

She slowly leaned down to hug me, and a warm tear rolled down my cheek.

'Lilla I was so angry!'

'I am sorry mom. But everything is fine now, it is okay,' I consoled her.

'I'm glad to see you finally open your eyes.' She sat on the edge of my bed.

I suddenly realized I had no idea when. 'How long have you been closed?'

'It is Friday, sir. You have been out for a while.'

'Friday?' I was shocked. I tried to remember when...but I did not want to think about it.

'They had to calm down for a while, honey - you've been hurt a lot.'

'I know.' I could feel it.

'So- o, like you are lucky Dr. Shezor was there. He is a genuinely nice man...even though he is incredibly young. And he looks more like a model than a doctor...'

'Did you meet Melchor?'

'And Melvin's sister Naddalin Natalie is a beautiful girl.'

'She is,' I agreed wholeheartedly.

She lay in the chair with her eyes closed and looked over her shoulder at Melvin. 'You didn't tell me you had such good friends in McAuley.'

I cringed and then cried.

'What hurts?' she asked anxiously looking back at me.

Melvin's eyes flashed into my face.

'It's fine,' I told them. 'I just have to remember not to move.'

He fell back into a ludicrous slumber.

I took advantage of my mother's temporary distraction to keep the subject from returning to my vague behavior. 'Where's Phil?' I quickly asked him.

'California - Oh, Lilla! You will never guess! Just as we are about to leave, great news!'

'Is Deann signed?' I guessed.

'Yes! How did you guess! The suns, can you believe it?'

'That's great, Mom,' I said with all the excitement I could manage, though I had little idea what that meant.

'Yes.' A new voice obscured his voice, a tone of hatred.

'She was always in the dark, that's why she didn't know anymore.'

'I know she's in now.' His voice was even, but his face was black with anger.

I tried to reach his face with my free hand, but something stopped me. I looked down and saw IV pulling on my arm.



'Oh,' I shivered.

'What is this, I could not remember asking from the last time I did...' He asked anxiously, distracted, but not enough. The darkness did not leave his eyes.

'Needles,' I explained, looking at him from my hand. I focused on the curved ceiling tile and tried to take a deep breath despite the pain in my ribs.

'Afraid of needles,' he muttered to himself, shaking his head. 'Oh, a sad vampire, who planned to kill her, sure enough, no problem, she ran to meet him. On the other hand, IV...'

Then at that moment in time my eyes. I was happy to know that at least this reaction was pain-free. I decided to change the subject.

'Why did you come?' I asked.

At first, he stared at me, confused and it hurt to touch his eyes. His cheeks curled up when he met his face. 'Do you want me to go?'

'No!' Shocked at the thought, I protested. 'No, I mean, why does Mommy think you are here? I need to get my story right before she comes back.'

'Oh,' he said, and his forehead turned back to smooth marble.

'I came to Phoenix to teach you some sense, to convince you to go back to the fork.' His big eyes were so honest and sincere that I believed him myself. 'You agreed to see me, and you went to the hotel where I was staying with Melchor and Naddalin Natalie - of course I was here under parental supervision,' he added politely. Room and... Well, you know the rest. You do not have to memorize details, but you have a good excuse to talk about the finer points.

I thought about it for a while. 'There are a few flaws to that story. Like unbroken windows that are still there now, and ones that look like they have been done not by a girl of your size or power.'

'Not really,' he said. 'Naddalin Natalie had a remarkably interesting piece of creative evidence. Everything was taken very convincingly - you can sue the hotel if you want. You do not have to worry about anything,' he promised me, stroking my cheek with light touches. 'Your only job now is to heal.'

I did not respond to his touch because I was not too lost in the pain or haze of the drugs. The inspector's voice grew mischievous- now he was not the only one to feel the misbehavior of my heart.

'That's embarrassing,' I said to myself.

He laughed and a suspicious look came into his eyes. 'Hm, I wonder...'

He leaned forward slowly; The sound of his screams grew louder without his lips touching mine. But when they did, even with very gentle pressure, the sound stopped completely.

When the monitor reported that my heartbeat started again, his fear turned to relief, and he suddenly fell back.

'Looks like I need to be more careful with you than usual.' He frowned.

'I haven't finished your name yet,' I said. 'Don't let me get there.'

He smiled and leaned forward to press his lips gently against mine. The attendant let go.

But then his lips trembled. He pulled away.

'I think I can hear your mother,' he said, smiling again.

'Don't leave me,' I yelled, as an irrational wave of panic swept through me. I could not let him go - he would be away from me again.

For a moment he read the fear in my eyes. 'I won't,' he promised sincerely and smiled. 'I'm going to take a nap,'

Then he said, moving from the rigid plastic chair next to me to the turquoise leatherette armchair under my bed, leaning back and closing his eyes. He was dead silent.

'Don't forget to breathe,' I said sarcastically. He took a deep breath, his eyes still closed.

I could hear my mother now. She was talking to someone, a nurse, and seemed tired and upset. I jumped out of bed and ran over to her, to reassure her, to promise that everything would be okay. But I was unable to jump, so I waited impatiently.

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'Ah mother!' I whispered, my voice full of love and relief.

She took Melvin to the still-sitting chair and sat on the edge of my bed.

'He's not going, is he?' she muttered to herself.

'Mom, I'm so happy to see you!'

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'Lilla, I was so angry!'

'I am sorry mom. But everything is fine now, it is okay,' I comforted her.

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'You're lucky Dr. Shezor was there. He is a genuinely nice man... even though he is incredibly young. And he looks more like a model than a doctor...'

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I took advantage of my mother's temporary distraction to keep the subject from returning to my vague demeanor. 'Where's Phil?' I asked him quickly.

'California - Oh, Lilla! You will never guess! Just as we are about to leave, great news!'

'Is Deann signed aging saying she is going to be next to braindead?' I suspected.

'Yes! How do you guess? The suns, can you believe it?'

'That's great, Mom,' I said with all the excitement I could handle, though I had no idea what that meant.

'And you love Los Altos Hills,' she teased as I stared blankly at her. 'I was a little concerned when Deann started talking about Akron, the snow, and everything because you know how much I hate the cold, but now Los Altos Hills! It is always sunny, and the humidity is not too bad. We get it. The prettiest house, with a green and white trim, and just like an old movie theater porch, and this big oak tree, and it is only a few minutes from the ocean, and you have your bathroom...

'Wait, Mom!' I cut him off. Melvin still had his eyes closed, but he looked too tired to sleep through. 'What are you talking about? I am not going to California. I live in McAuley.'

'But you don't have to do that anymore, fool,' she laughed. 'Deann can be so much now... we have talked a lot, and what I do is trade at home. Games, half with you, half with him.'

'Mom.' I hesitated, wondering how to be diplomatic about this 'I want to live in McAuley. I am in school, and I have two girlfriends' - she looked at Melvin again as I remembered friends, so I tried another

direction - 'and Charlie wants me. He is all alone there, and he cannot cook at all.

'Would you like to stay in McAuley?' She was confused. The thought was unthinkable to her. And then her eyes returned to Melvin. 'How?'

'I told you - school, Charlie - oh!' I shrugged. Not a clever idea.

Her hands trembled helplessly over me, a safe place. Trying to find it. She grabbed my forehead; it was unsealed.

'Lilla, honey, you hate McAuley...'

'It's not that bad.'

I closed her eyes for her with my hands...

Nevertheless, and looked back and forth between me and Melvin, this time she got excited.

'Is this a boy?' she whispered.

I opened my mouth to lie, but her eyes searched my face, and I knew she could see it.



'He's a part,' I said. No need to confess how big the part was.

'So, you had a chance to talk to Melvin?' I asked.

'Yes.' She hesitated, looking at his perfect still form. 'And that's what I want to talk to you about.'

Oh, 'about what?' I asked.

'Boy loves you,' she accused, lowering her voice.

'I think so,' I said.

'And about How does he feel?' she hid the curiosity in her voice well

I sighed and looked away as much as I loved my mother this was not a conversation I wanted to have with her Rum 'I love him so much' That sounds like something a teenage girl would say to her first boyfriend, 'Well, he looks great, and my goodness, he's unbelievably handsome, but you're so young, Lilla...' Her voice sounded uncertain; As far as I can remember, this is the first time since I was eight years old, she tried to act as a parental authority figure. From my conversations with her about men, I sensed a reasonable, but strong tone.

'I know, Mom, don't worry, it's just love,' I told her.

'That's right,' she agreed, just amused.

Then she sighed guiltily over her shoulder at the big round clock on the wall.

'Do you have to go?'

She bit her lip. 'Movie should have called a little later... I did not know you would wake up...'

'No problem mom' I tried to soften relief not to hurt her. 'I won't be alone.'

'I'll be back soon, I slept here, you know,' she said proudly.

'Oh, mother, you do not have to! You can sleep at home - I will never notice.' The whirl of painkillers in my brain made it hard to concentrate now, but I had been asleep for days.

'I was so scared,' Lamb admits. 'There's some crime in the area and I don't like being alone.'

'A crime?' I called.

'Someone broke into the dance studio around the corner from the house, burned it to the ground - nothing more! And left them a stolen car. Remember when you danced there, honey?'

'I remember.' I shook and shook.

'I can stay if you want me, honey.'

'No mom, it'll be fine, Melvin will be with me.'

That is why she wanted to stay. 'I'll be back tonight.' It sounded like a warning, like a promise, and she looked back at Melvin as she said it.

'I love you mom'

'I love you too Lilla. Try to be more careful when you walk baby, I do not want to lose you.'

Melvin's eyes remained closed, but a wide smile appeared on his face.

A nurse came in to check all my hoses and wires. My mother kissed my forehead, touched my bandaged hand, and left.

The nurse checked the paper readings on my heart monitor.

'Feel stressed honey? Your heart rate is a little high there.'

'I'm fine,' I told her.

'I'll tell your nursing staff when you wake up, she should see you soon.'

As soon as she closed the door, Melvin was by my side.

'Did you steal a car?' I raised my eyebrows.

He smiled; he had no remorse. 'It was a good car, very fast.'

'How did you sleep?' I asked.

'Interesting.' His eyes narrowed.

'What?'

He looked down when he answered. 'I wonder. California ... and your mother... well, I thought you wanted it.'

I stared at him blankly. 'But in California, you are inside all day. Like a real vampire, you only go out at night.'

He almost smiled, but not quite. Then his face was serious. 'I am staying in McAuley, Lilla. Or somewhere else,' he explained. 'Where I Can't Hurt You Anymore'

did not get through to me at first. I just kept staring as the words entered my head one by one like a terrible puzzle. I did not realize

my heart was pounding, but as my breath became a powerful gasp, I was aware of the sharp pain in my ribs increasing my resistance.

He said nothing; He looked intently at my face as the pain, which had nothing to do with broken bones, threatened to crush me, an infinitely worse pain.

And then another nurse purposely walked into the room. Melvin sat rock solid as she took in my expression with a trained eye before turning to the monitors.

'Time for more painkillers, honey?' she asked politely, touching the IV.

'No, no,' I said, trying to keep the pain out of my voice. 'I do not need anything.' I cannot close my eyes now.

'You do not have to be brave, honey. You cannot worry too much; you need to rest.' She waited but I just nodded.

'Okay,' she sighed. 'When you're done, hit the call button.'

She gave Melvin a pinched look, then gave him another concerned look at the machine before walking away.

His cool hands lay on my face; I stared at him with wild eyes.

'Sh- h, Lilla, calm down.'

'Don't leave me,' I begged in a broken voice.

'I won't,' he promised. 'Calm down before I call the nurse to relieve you.'

But my heart could not cool down.

'Lilla,' he stroked my face. 'I am going nowhere. I will be here if you need me.'

'Will you swear you won't leave me?' I whispered. At least I tried to control my breathing. My ribs were banging.

He put his hands on either side of my face and brought his face closer to mine. His eyes were big and serious. 'I swear.'

The smell of his breath was soothing. I thought it would relieve my shortness of breath. He continued to hold my gaze as my body slowly relaxed and his voice returned to normal. His eyes grew darker, closer to black than gold these days.

'Is it better than?' At that moment in time, he asked.

'Yes,' I said cautiously.

He shook his head and muttered something unintelligible. I chose the term 'overreaction'.

'Why did you say that?' I whispered, trying not to shake my voice. 'Tired of saving me all the time? Do you want me to go?'

'No, I do not want to be without you, Lilla, of course not. Be reasonable. And I would not have a problem saving you - if it were not for the fact that I was the one who put you in danger. The reason you are here is that I am here.' So, because I am alive.'

'Barely.' His voice was just a whisper. 'Covered with gas and plaster and difficult to move.'

'I'm not talking about my recent death experience,' I said angrily. 'Others - you can take your pick. Without you, I would be lost in the McAuley of the Northern End Graveyard, like my look-a-like sister Sara.'

He shivered at my words, but the tortured look did not leave his eyes.

'But that's not the worst,' he whispered. 'When I saw you lying there on the floor...broken and broken.' His voice was choking. 'I did not think I was late; I did not even hear you scream in pain - all those

excruciating memories I will carry with me forever. No, I felt the worst... knowing I could not stop. Assuming I would kill you myself.

But you did not.

'I could get it. So easy.'

I knew I had to calm down... but he tried to persuade himself to leave me, and panic swept through my lungs, trying to get out

'Promise me,' I whispered.

'What?'

'You know 'Now I am starting to get angry. He was too stubborn to dwell on the negative.

He heard the change in my voice. His eyes narrowed. 'I don't think I'm strong enough to get away from you stay, so you'll have your way... kill or not,' he added angrily.

'Nice.' But he did not promise- a fact I have not forgotten. The shock was minor; I had no strength to control his anger. 'He told me how you stopped... now I want to know why,' I said.

'Why?' Then he repeated gravely.



'Why did you do it? Why did you say 'Don't let the poison spread? Now I would be just like you.'

Melvin's eyes went flat black, and I remembered this was something he never wanted me to know Naddalin Natalie must have been too concerned about what she had learned about herself...or she was too careful with the ideas around her to tell me about the mechanics of vampire transformations. He was surprised and angry. His nose flared up and his mouth looked like it had been split from stone.

He would not answer that much was clear.

'I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships,' I said. 'But it just seems logical... a man and a woman should be equal to some degree... as if one of them cannot always intervene and can save the other. They should protect each other equally.'

He folded his arms by my bed and rested his chin on his hands. His expression softened; his anger intense. He decided he would not be mad at me. I hoped to get a chance'

'You saved me,' he said softly.

'I can't always be Joyce Dunn,' I said. 'I want to be Superman too.'

You do not know what you are asking for.' His voice was soft; He looked intently at the edge of the pillowcase.

'And you really like Los Altos Hills,' she teased as I looked at her blankly. 'I was a little worried when Deann started talking about Akron, the snow and everything, because you know how I hate the cold, but now Los Altos Hills! It is always sunny, and the humidity is not too bad. We got it. The nicest house, with green, white trim, and just Like an old movie porch, and this big oak tree, and it is only minutes from the ocean, and you will have your own bathroom...'

'Wait, Mom!' I cut him off. Melvin still had his eyes closed, but he looked too tired to pass sleep. 'What are you talking about? I am not going to California. I live in McAuley, not a rich town to say the least.'

'But you don't have to anymore, silly,' she laughed. 'Deann can be so much now... we've talked about it a lot, and what I do is trade at the home games, half time with you, half time with him.'

'Mom.' I hesitated, wondering how to be diplomatic about this. 'I want to live in McAuley. I sit in school, and I have two girlfriends' - she looked at Melvin again as I remembered friends, so I tried another

direction - 'and Charlie wants me. He is all alone there, and he cannot cook at all.

'You want to stay in McAuley?' She was confused. The thought was unthinkable to her. And then her eyes returned to Melvin. 'How?'

'I told you- school, Charlie- oh!' I shrugged. Not a clever idea.

Her hands were shaking helplessly over me, a safe place. trying to find it. She cupped my forehead; it was unsealed.

'Lilla, honey, you hate McAuley,' she said.

'It's not too bad.'

She closed her eyes and looked back and forth between me and Melvin, this time becoming overly excited.

'Is this a boy?' She whispered.

I opened my mouth to lie, but her eyes were searching for my face, and I knew she could see it.

'He's a part,' I said. No need to confess how big a part it was.

'So, you had a chance to talk to Melvin?' I asked.

'Yes.' She hesitated, looking at his perfect still form. 'And I want to talk to you about this.'

Oh, 'about what?' I asked.

'Boy loves you,' she accused, lowering her voice.

'I think so, too,' I said.

'And about How does he feel?' she hid the curiosity in her voice well.

I sighed, looking away. As much as I loved my mother, this was not a conversation I wanted to have with her. Rum. 'I'm so crazy about him.' There - sounds like something a teenage girl would say to her first boyfriend.

'Well, he looks great, and, my goodness, he's incredibly good-looking, but you're so young, Lilla...' Her voice was uncertain; As far as I can remember, this is the first time since I was eight years old that she tried to act like a parental authority figure. From my conversations with her about men, I sensed a reasonable- yet- strong tone of voice.

'I know, mom, don't worry about it, it's just love,' I told her.

'That's right,' she agreed, simply amused.

Then she sighed guiltily over her shoulder at the large round clock on the wall.

'Do you have to go?'

She bit her lip. 'The film should have been called a little later... I did not know you were going to wake up...'

'No problem mom' I tried to soften the relief so as not to hurt her feelings. 'I will not be alone.'

'I'll be back soon, I've been sleeping here, you know,' she said proudly.

'Oh, mother, you do not have to do that! You can sleep at home- I will never notice.' The swirl of painkillers in my brain was making it hard to concentrate now, but I had been asleep for days.

'I was so scared,' Lamb admits. 'There's been some crime in the area, and I don't like being alone.'

'A crime?' I called.

'Someone broke into the dance studio around the corner from the house, burned it to the ground - nothing left! And left a stolen car in front of them. Do you remember dancing there, honey?'

'I remember.' I shook and shook.

'I can stay if you want me, baby.'

'No mom I'll be fine Melvin will be with me.'

That is why she wanted to stay. 'I'll be back tonight.' It sounded like a warning, like a promise, and she looked at Melvin again as she said it.

'I love you mom'

'I love you too Lilla. Try to be more careful when you walk honey, I do not want to lose you.'

Melvin's eyes remained closed, but a wide smile appeared on his face.

A nurse came in to check all my tubes and wires. My mother kissed my forehead, touched my bandaged hand, and left.

The nurse was checking the paper readings on my heart monitor.

'Are you feeling stressed honey? Your heart rate is a little high there.'

- 'I'm fine,' I told her.

- 'I'll tell your RN when you wake up, she should see you in a minute.'

As soon as she closed the door, Melvin was by my side.

'Did you steal a car?' I raised my eyebrows.

He smiled; he did not repent. 'It was a good car, very fast.'

'How was your sleep?' I asked.

'Interesting.' His eyes narrowed.

'What...?'

He looked down as he answered. 'I wonder. California ...and your mother...well, I thought you wanted it.'

I stared blankly at him. 'But in California, you are stuck inside all day. Like a real vampire, you only come out at night.'

He almost smiled, but not quite. Then his face was serious. 'I will be staying in McAuley, Lilla. Or somewhere like that,' he explained. 'Where I Can't Hurt You Anymore'

Like it did not sink in at first. I just kept staring as the words entered my head one by one like a horrible puzzle. Little did I know that

my heart was racing, but as my breathing became a forceful gasp of air, I was aware of the sharp pain in my ribs that raised my resistance.

He said nothing; He looked intently at my face as the pain, which had nothing to do with broken bones, threatened to crush me, an infinitely worse pain.

...And then another nurse walked purposefully into the room. Melvin sat as stone as she took in my expression with a practiced eye before turning to the monitors.

'Time for more pain meds, dear?' she asked politely, touching the IV food.

'No, no,' I said, trying to keep the pain out of my voice. 'I don't need anything.' I cannot close my eyes now.

'You do not need to be brave, honey. You better not worry too much; you need to rest.' She waited but I just nodded my head.

'Okay,' she sighed. 'When you're ready, press the call button.'

She gave Melvin a narrow look and shot him one more worried look at the machine before walking away.



His cool hands were on my face; I stared at him with wild eyes.

'Sh- h, Lilla, calm down.'

'Don't leave me,' I begged in a broken voice.

'I won't,' he promised. 'Now relax before I call the nurse to relieve you.'

But my heart could not cool down.

'Lilla,' he caressed my face. 'I am not going anywhere. I will be here if you need me.'

'Will you swear you won't leave me?' I whispered. At least I tried to control my breathing. My ribs were pounding.

He put his hands on both sides of my face and brought his face closer to mine. His eyes were wide and serious. 'I swear.'

The smell of his breath was soothing. I thought it would ease my shortness of breath. He continued to hold my gaze as my body slowly relaxed and his voice returned to its normal pace. His eyes darkened, closer to black than gold today.

'Now you're better than?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said cautiously.

He shook his head and mumbled something unintelligible. I chose the term 'overreaction'.

'Why did you say that?' I whispered, trying to keep my voice from shaking. 'Are you tired of saving me all the time? You want me to go?'

'No, I do not want to be without you, Lilla, of course not. Be reasonable. And I would have no problem saving you- if it were not for the fact that I was the one who put you in danger. The reason you are here is that I am here.' Cause- alive.'

'Barely.' His voice was only a whisper. 'Covered with gas and plaster and difficult to move.'

'I'm not referring to my recent death experience,' I said angrily. 'I was thinking of others... you can take your pick. If it were not for you, I would be lost in McAuley Cemetery.'

He winced at my words, but the tortured look did not leave his eyes.

'But that's not the worst part,' he whispered. He pretended not to. 'When I saw you there on the floor...broken and broken.' His voice was

choking. 'I did not think I was too late; I did not even hear you scream in pain - all those unbearable memories I will carry with me forever. No, I felt the worst ... knowing that I could not stop. Believing I was going to kill you myself.

But you did not.

'I could get it. So easily.'

I knew I had to calm down... but he was trying to talk himself into leaving me, and the panic rattled through my lungs, trying to get out.

'Promise me,' I whispered.

'What?'

'When someone wants to kill you, you're brave as a lion - and then when someone mentions dancing...' He shook his head.

I gulped.

## 2 FIRST LOOK

My mom forced me to the train station with the windows all the way up in the car, and the heater would not work. It was five degrees in Pittsburgh and the atmosphere was perfectly melancholic and full of clouds. This next trip was after a long plane ride, and the frosty crystal

hung in the air, I was wearing my favorite shirt - sleeveless even if it was so cold it did not feel that way, white lace with eyelets; I wore it as a sign of farewell. My carry-on was a backpack with a cat on it, that had been passed down from my sisters.

On the farmland in the state of Pennsylvania, a small town named McAuley exists under constant cloud cover just like Pittsburgh, yet without human life, running around. This unimportant city receives more sown than any other place in the United States, or so I feel. From this municipality and its dark and omnipresent shadow, my mother fled with me when I was only a few months old. In this municipality, I had been obliged to spend a month every summer until the age of thirteen. This was the year I finally started; Instead, for the past three summers, my dad Charlie has taken me to California for a two-week vacation, at the park with the mouse, like I was five or something.

I have now exiled myself to McAuley, an act I took with great horror. I hated McAuley. I loved the phoenix I loved the sun and the scorching heat. I loved the lively and sprawling city more than nothing but windmills and corn and wheat fields.

'Lilla,' my mom said to me - the last of a thousand times - before I got on the train. 'You don't have to do this.'

My mom glimpses me except for the long hair and the laugh lines. I felt spasms of panic as I stared into her large childish eyes. How could I leave my loving, unpredictable, crazy mother alone? Sure, she had Deann now, so the bills would be paid, there would be food in the fridge, gas in her car, and someone to call if she got lost, but still...

'I want to go,' I lied. I had always been a bad liar, but I had told that lie so many times lately that it almost sounded convincing now

'Tell Charlie I said hello.'

'I will do it.'

'See you soon,' she insisted. 'You can come home anytime you want - I'll be back whenever you need me.'

Whereas I could see the sacrifice in his eyes behind the promise.

'Don't worry about me,' I urged him. 'It is going to be awesome. Love you, mom.'

She hugged me tightly for a minute, then I got on the steam train, and she was off.

It is around a four-hour ride from Pittsburgh to the neutral zone I was going to be dumped on, another hour in a small car to fields and a home next to yet even more railways, then an hour drive to McAuley I do not mind flying, the hour in the car with Charlie did worry me a bit though. I was nice about the whole thing. He seemed genuinely pleased that, for the first time, I was living with him indefinitely. He had already enrolled me in high school and wanted to help me find a car.

But with Charlie, it would certainly be awkward. Neither of us was what anyone would consider wordy, and I still did not know what to say. I knew he was more than a little confused by my decision- Like my mother before me, I had made no secret of my dislike of McAuley.

It was raining when I landed in Big Sur. I did not see it as an omen - just inevitable. I had already said goodbye to the sun, and vitality.

Charlie was waiting for me in the plow car when he is not the only town authority.

I expected that too. Charlie is the Natalie-Black Police Chief for the good folks of McAuley. My main motivation for buying a car, despite the scarcity of funds, was that I refused to be driven around town

in a car with red and blue lights on the roof. Nothing slows down traffic better than an officer.

Charlie awkwardly hugged me with one arm as I stumbled out of the plane.

'Nice to see you, Bellas,' he said smiling as he caught me and automatically supported me.

'You have not changed much. How's Allison?'

'Mom is fine. Nice to see you too, dad. Most of my sundresses were too shabby- and trashy for this town stuck in the past. My mom and I had pooled our resources to complete my winter wardrobe, but it was still sparse. Everything fits easily in the cruiser's trunk.'

I got you a good car, cheap,' he announced once we were locked in.

'What type of car?' I was suspicious of the way he said, 'good car for you' as opposed to just 'good car'.

'Well, it's actually a Bellair, a 57 Chevy.' I was given the car, and the home, as you know your grandmother passed last year, and never did get over the death of Chiaz. So, I was given a family home, to look after, not much of a home, is it?

'Where did you get it?'

'Remember Old man Black in had it locked in his barn?' No. I plan to pass it down the line, that is what your grandmother wanted, and your sister, whom I will not even say her name, is still hospitalized for being mental.

'He used to take us fishing in the summer with this car,' Charlie said.

That would explain why I did not remember him. I am good at banishing Ch painful and useless dares of my mind.

'He's in a wheelchair now,' Charlie continued as I did not answer, 'he could not drive anymore, and he is offered to give it to the grandkids for me to give to you and the girls.

'The was the question he hoped I would not ask.

'Well, it was your Sistare of all people who has done a lot of work on the engine - it's really only a year ago, before her relapse.'

I hoped he did not think so little of me that he thought I would give up so easily. 'When did he accept it?'

'He bought it in 1957, I think.'



'Did he buy it new?

'Well yes. It was new in the early '57s- or late '58s at the earliest,' he admitted sheepishly. I know nothing about cars. I could not fix it if something went wrong, and I could not afford a mechanic...'

'Really, Lilla, it is going well. They do not build them anymore. like this.'

This thing, I thought...it had possibilities - at least as an alias.

'How cheap is cheap of even free- it was free?' That was the part I could not compromise on '

Well, darling, I already bought it for you. As a homecoming gift. Charlie looked at me sideways with a hopeful expression.

Wow. Complimentary. 'It wasn't necessary, Dad.'

I do not mind. I want you to be happy here. He was staring straight ahead as he said that. Charlie was not comfortable expressing his feelings aloud. I inherited that from him. So, I looked straight ahead as I replied,

'That's nice, Dad. Thanks. It is impossible to be happy in McAuley. He did not have to suffer with me. And I have never looked a vacant car in the mouth - or the engine.

'Well, you're welcome,' he muttered, embarrassed by my thanks.

We exchanged a few more comments about the weather being wet and that was about it for conversation. We stared out the windows in silence.

It was beautiful, of course; I could not deny it. Everything was no longer leafy- the trees, their trunks covered with frost, their branches hanging from them like a canopy with dripping masses of snow, the ground covered with ferns that looked glassy. Even the air was seeping cold and like cessation through the left behind leaves.

It was too overgrown - an alien world.

Eventually, we made it to Charlie. He still lived in the small two-bedroom house he and my mother bought when they first got married. These were the only days of their marriage - the first. There, parked on the street in front of the house that did not change, was my new well, new to me- car. It was a faded blue color, with large, rounded fenders and a

bulbous cabin. To my surprise, I loved it. I did not know if it would work, but I could see myself in it. Also, it was one of those solid pieces of iron that never gets damaged - the kind you see at an accident scene that does not scratch the paint surrounded by bits of the alien car that wrecked it...

'Wow dad, I love that! Thanks! Now my awful day tomorrow would be just as less awful. I would have no choice between walking the three kilometers to school in the rain or agreeing to take a ride in the chief's car.

'I'm glad you like it,' Charlie said gruffly, apologetic again.

It only took one ride to get all my possessions upstairs. I had the west room which faced the front yard next to an old tree, and a gaping hole in the ground that was linked by a railroad massively long and stupidly tall steel rusty truss viaduct that looks as if it is about to fall any day now, and the railroad tracks are the only thing holding it up. The room was familiar; it has been mine since I was born. The wooden floor, the light blue walls, the tapered ceiling, the cream lace curtains around the windows - all this belonged to my childhood. The only changes Charlie ever made were swapping out the crib for a bed and adding a desk as I grew. A used computer now lay on the desk, and the modem's phone line was piled on the floor to the nearest phone jack. It was a requirement from

my mother so that we could easily stay connected. The rocking chair from when I was a baby was still around.

There was only a small bathroom up the stairs that I had to share with Charlie. I tried not to stress this fact too much.

One of the most reasonable things about Charlie is that he does not levitate over me.

He let me unpack and settle in, which would have been completely impossible for my mother. It was nice to be alone, to not have to smile and look happy; a relief to look out the window at the pouring rain and only shed a few tears. I was in no mood to go to an actual wine bar. Saved this for bedtime when I had to think about tomorrow.

McAuley High School had a staggering enrollment of only fifty- seven- now fifty-eight- students; In my junior class at home alone, there were over seven hundred people. All the children here had grown up together - their grandparents were toddlers together.

I would be the big city's new girl, an oddity, a freak. Maybe if I looked like a Phoenix girl, I could enjoy it. But physically, I would not go anywhere. I should be tanned, athletic, blonde a softball player, or a cheerleader- all things that come with life in the Valley of the Sun.

Instead, despite the constant sun, I had ivory skin without the excuse of having blue eyes or red hair. I have always been thin but gentle, obviously not an athlete; I lacked the hand-eye coordination to exercise without humiliating myself and hurting myself and anyone who got too close.

When I devoured placing my clothes away in the ancient wicker dresser, I grabbed my bag of toiletries and headed to the shared bathroom to clean up after the day's travels. I studied my face in the mirror while stroking my disheveled, damp hair. It may have been the light, but I already looked pale, and unhealthy. My skin could be pretty - it was noticeably clear, almost sheer - but it all depended on the color. I had no color here.

As I faced my pale reflection in the mirror, I had to admit that I was lying to myself. Not only physically, but I also would never fit in. And if I could not find a niche in a school of three thousand people, what opportunity would I have here?

I did not have good relationships with people my age. The truth was that I did not get along well with people, period. Even my mother, to whom I was closer than anyone on this planet, was never in tune with me, never exactly in agreement. Sometimes I wondered if I was

seeing the same things through my eyes that the rest of the world was seeing through theirs. There was a bug in my brain. But the reason did not matter. The only thing that mattered was the effect. And tomorrow would only be the beginning.

I did not sleep well that night even after I stopped crying. The constant rush of rain and wind on the roof would not take up space. I pulled the faded old blanket over my head and later added the pillow as well. Whereas I could not fall asleep until after midnight when the rain, snow, and wind finally turned into a more peaceful downpour.

A thick haze was all I could see out the window in the morning and I felt the claustrophobia welling up inside me. You could never see the sky here; it was like an enclosure.

Breakfast with Charle was a quiet occurrence, yet so was staying over at Mr. Anderson's home on the weekends, is why I have become the girl that was legally adopted by this man as Lily Anderson, AKA 'Little Miss Anderson' as some call me, yet I get both names. He wished me good luck in school. I thanked him, knowing full well that his hope was in vain. Serendipity tended to avoid me. Charlie went to the police station first, where his wife and family were. Behind her left, I sat down on one of three unsuitable chairs at the old square oak table and

scrutinized his small kitchen with its dark paneled walls, pale blond cabinets, and dark wood floor. Nothing has changed. My mother had painted the cupboards eighteen years ago to bring some sunshine into the house.

A series of pictures hung above the small fireplace in the adjoining family room the size of a handkerchief. First a wedding photo of Charlie and my mother in Venice, then one of the three of us in the hospital after I was born with all my sisters, taken by a helpful nurse, followed by the procession of my school photos to the last year. It was embarrassing to look at the cheeks of baby hood still out for the world to see- I had to see what I could do to get Charlie to put her somewhere else, at least while I was living here.

It was impossible not to see in this house that Charlie had never gotten over my mother. I was uncomfortable.

I did not want to be early for school, but I could not stay home anymore. I put on my jacket - which looked like a biohazard suit - and headed out into the showers.

It was still drizzling with a mix of snow, not enough to soak me right away as I grabbed the house key, under the doormat which was

still hidden and locked under the eaves near the door. The sloshing of my new waterproof boots was nerve-wracking. I missed the normal gravel crunch while walking. I could not stop and admire my car like I wanted to; I could not wait to get out of the damp murk swirling around my head and clinging to my hair underneath my hood.

It was optimistic and dry in the car. Granddad or Charlie had cleaned it up. It was like new, but the spotty-colored upholstered seats still smelled faintly of peppermint tobacco, old rotten gasoline, and feminine products. To my relief, the engine started quickly but noisily, roaring then idling at maximum volume. Well, a car this old had to have a flaw. The antique radio worked, a plus I did not expect.

Seeing the school was not difficult, it was up on this hill, even though I had never been there. School, like most other things, was right on the edge of the hill. It was not obvious that it was a school; only the sign that said it was McAuley High School made me stop. It looked like a group of related brown brick houses. There were so many trees and bushes that I could not tell their size at first. What was the meaning of the institution? I wondered wistfully. Where were the chain-link fences, the metal sensors?



I parked in front of the first towering part of it, which had a small sign above the door that said Reception. Nobody else was parked there, so I was sure it was illegal, but I decided to head inside instead of driving around in the rain like an idiot. I reluctantly got out of the grilled taxi and walked down a small stone path lined with dark hedges.

I took a serious breath before opening the door. The interior was very bright and warmer than I had hoped. The office was small; a small waiting room with padded folding chairs, an orange flecked advertising carpet, posters and awards on the walls, and a large ticking clock. Plants were growing all over the place in big plastic pots as if there was not enough greenery inside. The room was divided in two by a long counter stuffed with wire baskets filled with papers and colorful flyers taped to the front. Behind the counter were three desks, one of which was occupied by a tall woman with red hair and glasses. She was wearing a purple T-shirt, which at once made me feel overdressed.

The blond-haired person- haired woman looked up. 'Can I help you?'

'I'm Lill Natalie-Black,' I informed her, seeing the instant realization in her eyes. I was expected to be, no doubt, a subject of gossip. The daughter of the Chief's fugitive ex-wife came home.

'Of course,' she declared. She rummaged through an uncertain pile of documents on her desk until she found the ones she was looking for. 'I have your timetable here and a map of the school.' She brought several sheets to the counter to show the eggs.

She walked through my classes for me, marking the best route to each on the map and giving me a slip of paper to mark each teacher to bring back at the end of the day. She smiled at me and hoped, like Charlie, that I would like to be here in McAuley. I smile back at him in the most convincing way possible.

As I walked back to my car, other students were already arriving. I walked around the school and followed the line of traffic. I was happy to see that most of the cars were older than mine, nothing notable. Back home, I had lived in one of the few working-class neighborhoods that made up the idyll Valley district. It was common to see brand new Toyotas or Hondas in the student parking lot. The prettiest car here was a shiny Jeep, and it caught my eye. Still, I turned off the engine as soon as I got to a place, lest the thunderous volume catches my eye.

I looked at the map in the car and tried to memorize it now; I hope I do not have to walk with him all day. I stuffed everything into my bag, slung the strap over my shoulder, and took a deep breath. I can do it, I

lied to myself weak. No one would bite me. I finally execrated and got out of the car.

I kept my face pulled back in my hood as I walked toward the sidewalk with my kiddish pink backpack, which was crowded with teenagers. My simple black jacket did not attract attention, I realized with relief.

Once around the cafeteria, the building there was easy to spot. A large black '13' has been painted over a white square in the east corner. As I approached the door, my breathing began to hyperventilate. I tried to hold my breath as I followed two unisex raincoats through the door.

The classroom was small. The people in front of me stopped just inside the door to hang their coats on a long row of hooks. I copied them. There were two girls, one porcelain blond-haired person- haired person, the other also pale, with light brown hair. At least my skin would not come out here.

I brought the note to the professor, a tall, hairless man whose desk bore a name tag finding him as Mr. Stackawitz. He stared at me when he saw my name - not an encouraging response - and of course, I blushed tomato red. While negligibly he sent me to an unobstructed desk in the

back without familiarizing me with class. It was harder for my new classmates to look me in the back, but somehow, they made it. I attended the reading list the teacher had given me. It was quite simple- Brontë, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Faulkner. I had already read everything. It was comforting... and boring. I was wondering if my mother would send me my file of old essays or if she would think it, was fraud. I went through various conversations with her in my head as the teacher continued to talk.

When the bell tolled, a nasal hum, a lanky boy with skin issues and oil-black hair leaned down the aisle to speak to me.

'You are Lill Natalie-Black, aren't you?' He looked like the guy from the overly helpful chess club.

'Lilla,' I corrected. Everyone within three seats turned to me.

'Where's your next lesson?' ' He asked.

I had to check my bag. 'Uh, government, with Jefferson, in the building.'

There was nowhere to look without meeting prying eyes.

'I'm on my way to building four, I could show you the way...'

Too helpful. 'I'm J.A,' he added.

I smile shyly. 'Thanks a lot.'

We took our jackets and went out into the rain, which had resumed. I could have sworn there were several people behind us close enough to hear. I was hoping not to become paranoid.

'So, it's very different from Phoenix, huh?' He asked.

'Absolutely.'

'It doesn't rain much there, does it?'

'Three or four times a year.'

'Wow, how does it have to be? He wondered.

'Sun shining,' I tell him.

'You don't look very tanned.'

'My mother is partially pal.'

He looked at my face with concern and I sighed. It looked like clouds, and a sense of humor did not mix. A few months of this and I forgot how to use sarcasm.

We walked around the cafeteria to the south buildings near the gym. J.A led me straight to the door even though it was marked.

'Well, good luck,' he said when I touched the handle. 'Maybe we have other classes together.' He looked hopeful.

I gave him a vague smile and went inside.

The rest of the morning went the same way. My trigonometry teacher, Mr. DeVolcano, whom I would have hated anyway just for the material he taught, was the only one to make me stand in front of the class and introduce myself. I stuttered, blushed, and tripped over my boots on my way to my seat.

After two lessons, I started to recognize several faces in each class. There was always someone braver than the rest who would show up and ask me questions about how I loved McAuley. I tried to be a diplomat, but I lied a lot. At least I never used the card.

A girl sat next to me in Trigo and Spanish and took me to the cafeteria for lunch. She was tiny, a few inches shorter than my five-foot-four, but her very curly black hair made up much of the difference between our heights. I could not remember her name, so I smiled and nodded as she chatted about teachers and classes. I was not trying to follow.

We sat at the end of a full table with some of her friends she introduced me to. I forgot all their names as soon as she said them. They seemed impressed by their courage to speak to me. The English boy, J.A, waved at me from across the room.

It was there, sitting in the dining room conversing with seven curious strangers, that I first saw them.

They sat in the corner of the cafeteria, as far from my seat in the long room as possible. It was five. They neither spoke nor ate, although each had a tray of untouched food in front of them. Unlike most of the other students, they were not staring at me, so it was safe to watch them without fear of meeting a pair of overly interested eyes. But it was none of those things that caught and held my attention.

They did not look alike at all. One of the three boys was tall - muscular like a serious weightlifter, with dark, curly hair. Another was a taller, thinner, but still muscular and honey blond-haired person- haired person. The last one was lanky, less bulky, with messy tan hair. He was more childlike than the others, who looked like they were in college or even teachers rather than students.

The girls were opposed. The tall one was sculptural. She had a gorgeous figure, the kind you saw on the cover of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, the kind that made all the girls around her suffer with their self-esteem just because she was in the same room. Her hair was golden and gently swept down the middle of her back. The little girl was like an elf, extremely thin, with small features. Her hair was jet black, cropped short, and swept in all directions.

And yet, they were all the same. Each of them was chalk-pale, the palest of all the students living in this sunless city. Paler than me, the albino. They all had very dark eyes, despite the range of hair tones. They also had dark circles under their eyes - purple bruises. As if they were all suffering from a sleepless night or almost recovered from a broken nose. Although their noses, all their facial features, were straight, perfect, and square.

But none of that is why I could not look away.

I stared at them because their faces, so different, so similar, were all dazzlingly beautiful, inhuman. They were faces you would not expect, except on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old expert like an angel's face. It was hard to decide who was prettier - the perfect blonde girl or the bronze-haired boy.



They were all looking away - away from each other, away from other students, away from anything as far as I could tell. As I watched, the little girl got up with her tray- unopened lemonade, bitten apple- and walked away with a quick, graceful run worthy of a podium. I watched in amazement at her dancer's nimble step until she put down her tray and slipped out the back door faster than I thought possible. My eyes turned to the others who were sitting there without changing anything.

'Who are you?' I asked the girl from my Spanish class whose name I had forgotten.

When she looked up to see who I was talking about - although she already knew that from my tone of voice - he suddenly looked at her, the thinnest, the most childish, the youngest. He looked at my neighbor for a split second, then his dark eyes blinked into mine.

Then he quickly looked away, faster than I could, though I at once looked down in embarrassment. In that brief glimpse, her face was completely uninteresting - it was as if she had called out his name, and he had looked up in involuntary response, having already decided not to answer.

My neighbor chuckled in embarrassment and looked at the table like me.

'This is Melvin and Dejen Shezor and Vivian and Jae Mercado. The one who left was Naddalin Natalie Shezor; they all lived together with Dr. Shezor and his wife.' She said this calmly.

I glimpsed sideways at the handsome boy, who was peeking at his tray now, picking a bagel to compositions with long, pale fingers. His jaws were moving very quickly, his excellent lips barely opening. The other three still glanced away, and yet he was uttering quietly to them.

Strange, unpopular names, I thought. The kinds of names grandparents had. But that was in vogue here - small town characters? I finally remembered that my neighbor was called Charity-Anna, a perfectly common name. There were two girls named Charity-Anna yet just called Anny in my History class back home.

'They are... very nice-looking.' I struggled with the conspicuous understatement.

'Yes!' Charity-Anna agreed with another chuckle. 'They're all together though - Dejen and Vivian, and Jae and Naddalin Natalie, I mean. And they live together.' Her voice held all the shock and condemnation of

the small town, I thought critically. But, if I were being honest, I had to admit that even in Phoenix, it would cause hearsay.

'Which ones are the Shezor?' I asked. 'They don't look related...'

'Oh, they are not. Dr. Shezor is young, in his twenties or early thirties. They are all adopted. The Mercados are siblings, twins - the blond-haired person- haired people - and they are foster children.'

'They look a little old for foster children.'

'They are now, Jae and Vivian are both eighteen, but they have been with Mrs. Shezor since they were eight. She is their aunt or something like that.'

'That's really kind of nice - for them to take care of all those kids like that, when they're so young and everything.'

'I guess so,' Charity-Anna admitted reluctantly, and I got the impression that she did not like the doctor and his wife for some reason. With the glances she was throwing at their adopted children, I would presume the reason was jealousy. 'I think that Mrs. Shezor can't have any kids, though,' she added as if that eased their service.

Throughout all this discussion, my eyes flashed repeatedly to the table where the strange family sat. They continued to look at the walls and not eat.

'Have they always lived in McAuley?' I asked. Certainly, I would have caught them on one of my summers here.

'No,' she said in a voice that implied it should be obvious, even to a new arrival like me. 'They just moved down two years ago from somewhere in Canada.'

'You know.' Now I am starting to get angry. He was too stubborn to dwell on the negative.

He heard the change in my voice. His eyes narrowed. 'I don't think I'm strong enough to stay away from you, so you'll have your way... kill or not,' he added angrily.

'Nice.' But he did not promise it - a fact I have not forgotten. The shock was only slight; I had no strength to control his anger. 'He told me how you quit...now I want to know why,' I said.

'Why?' He repeated earnestly.

'Why did you do it? Why didn't you let the poison spread? Now I would be like you.'

Melvin's eyes seemed to turn a flat black, and I remembered that this was something he never wanted me to know. Naddalin Natalie must have been too concerned with what she had learned about herself...or she was too careful with the ideas around her to fill me in on the mechanics of vampire transformations. He was surprised and angry. His nose flared, and his mouth looked like it was split from stone.

He would not answer that much was clear.

'I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships,' I said. 'But it just seems logical... a man and a woman should be equal to some degree... like, one of them cannot always step in and save the other. They must protect each other equally.'

He folded his arms by the side of my bed and rested his chin on his hands. His expression softened, and his anger is intense. He decided he was not going to be mad at me. I was hoping to get a chance to warn Naddalin Natalie before she found him.

'You saved me,' he said quietly.

'I can't be Joyce Dunn all the time,' I said. 'I want to be Superman too.'

'You don't know what you're asking for.' His voice was soft; He looked intently at the edge of the pillowcase.

'I do.'

'Lilla, you do not know. It has taken me almost ninety years to think about this, and I am still not sure.'

'Do you wish Melchor hadn't saved you?' 'No, I don't want that.' He paused before continuing. But my life is over. I did not give up anything.'

'You're my life, you're the only one that hurts me to lose.' I was getting better at this. It was easy to admit how much I needed him.

But he was so calm. He decided.

'I cannot, Lilla. You.'

'Why not?' My throat tightened and the words did not come out as I wanted them to. 'Don't tell me it is so hard! I think after today or a few days ago...anyway, it should not be anything after that.'

He stared at me.

'And the pain?' He asked.

I screamed. I could not help it. But I tried to make an expression of how clearly, I remembered the feeling...in the veins', 'I said, minutes passed in silence as I struggled to answer his question. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. I closed it again. He waited, and his expression became triumphant as he knew I had no truthful answer, that does not matter either.' I finally mumbled. My voice was not as convincing as my swash had been. 'Ren and acute; She always made the choices that worked for her - and she wants me to do the same. And Charlie is patient, he was alone. I cannot take care of them forever. I have my own. life to live.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'And it is not over for you.'

'I was there!'

'You'll be fine,' he reminded me.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down, ignoring the pain that awoke. I stared at him, and he stared back. There was no agreement on his face.

'No,' I said slowly. 'I'm not.'

Forehead... 'Of course, you are. You might have a scar or two...'

'You're wrong,' I said. 'I'm going to die.'

'Lilla,' he was worried now be out of here in a few days.

My mind goes back to my thoughts, like dust and spider web connecting my brain.

'When someone wants to kill you, you're brave as a lion - and then when someone mentions dancing...' He shook his head.

I gulped yet again.

'Lilla, I will not let anything hurt you - not even yourself. I will not let go of you once, I promise.'

I thought about that and suddenly felt much better. He could see that in my face.

'There, now,' he said gently, 'it won't be so bad.' He leaned down and wrapped one arm around my waist. I took his other hand and let him lift me from the car.

He kept his arm tightly around me, supporting me as I limped toward the school. In Phoenix, they held proms in hotel ballrooms. This dance was in the gym, of course. It was the only room in town big enough



for a dance. When we got inside, I giggled. There were actual balloon arches and twisted garlands of pastel crepe paper festooning the walls.

'This looks like a horror movie waiting to happen,' I snickered.

'Well,' he muttered as we slowly approached the ticket table - he was carrying most of my weight, but I still had to shuffle and wobble my feet forward - 'there are more than enough vampires present.'

I looked at the dance floor; a wide gap had formed in the center of the floor, where two couples whirled gracefully. The other dancers pressed to the sides of the room to give them space - no one wanted to stand in contrast with such radiance. Dejen and Jae were intimidating and flawless in classic tuxedos. Naddalin Natalie was striking in a black satin dress with geometric cutouts that bared large triangles of her snowy white skin. And Vivian was... well, Vivian. She was unbelievable. Her vivid scarlet dress was backless, tight to her calves where it flared into a wide ruffled train, with a neckline that plunged to her waist. I pitied every girl in the room, myself included.

'Do you want me to bolt the doors so you can massacre the unsuspecting townsfolk?' I whispered conspiratorially.

'And where do you fit into that scheme?' He glared.

'Oh, I'm with the vampires, of course.'

He smiled reluctantly. 'Anything to get out of dancing.'

'Anything.'

He bought our tickets, then turned me toward the dance floor.

I cringed against his arm and dragged my feet.

'I've got all night,' he warned.

Eventually, he towed me out to where his family was twirling elegantly - if in a style unsuitable to the present time and music. I watched in horror.

'Melvin.' My throat was so dry I could only manage a whisper. 'I honestly can't dance!' I could feel the panic bubbling up inside my chest.

'Don't worry, silly,' he whispered back. 'I can.' He put my arms around his neck and lifted me to slide his feet under mine.

And then we were whirling, too.

'I feel like I'm five years old,' I laughed after a few minutes of effortless waltzing.

'You don't look five,' he murmured, pulling me closer for a second so that my feet were briefly a foot from the ground.

Naddalin Natalie caught my eye on a turn and smiled in encouragement - I smiled back. I was surprised to realize that I was enjoying myself... a little.

'Okay, this isn't half bad,' I admitted.

But Melvin was staring toward the doors, and his face was angry.

'What is it?' I wondered aloud. I followed his gaze, disoriented by the spinning, but finally, I could see what was bothering him. Chiaz Naztherth, not in a tuxedo, but a long- sleeved white shirt and tie, his hair smoothed back into his usual ponytail, was crossing the floor toward us.

After the first shock of recognition, I could not help but feel bad for Chiaz. He was uncomfortable - excruciatingly so. His face was apologetic as his eyes met mine.

Melvin snarled very quietly.

'Behave!' I hissed.

Melvin's voice was scathing. 'He wants to chat with you.'

Chiaz reached us then, the embarrassment and apology even more clear on his face.

'Hey, Lilla, I was hoping you would be here.' Chiaz sounded like he had been hoping for the exact opposite. But his smile was just as warm as ever.

'Hi Chiaz.' I smiled back. 'What's up?'

'Can I cut in?' he asked tentatively, glancing at Melvin for the first time. I was shocked to notice that Chiaz did not have to look up. He must have grown half a foot since the first time I had seen him.

Melvin's face was composed of his expression blank. His only answer was to set me carefully on my feet and take a step back.

'Thanks,' Chiaz said amiably.

Melvin just nodded, looking at me intently before he turned to walk away.

Chiaz put his hands on my waist, and I reached up to put my hands on his shoulders.

'Wow, Jake, how tall are you now?'

He was smug. 'Six- one.'

We were not dancing - my leg made that impossible. Instead, we swayed awkwardly from side to side without moving our feet. It was

just as well; the recent growth spurt had left him looking gangly and uncoordinated, he was no better a dancer than I was.

'So, how did you end up here tonight?' I asked without true curiosity. Considering Melvin's reaction, I could guess.

'Can you believe my dad paid me twenty bucks to come to your prom?' he admitted, slightly ashamed.

'Yes, I can,' I muttered. 'Well, I hope you are enjoying yourself, at least. Seen anything you like?' I teased, nodding toward a group of girls lined up against the wall like pastel confections.

'Yeah,' he sighed. 'But she's taken.'

He glanced down to meet my curious gaze for just a second - then we both looked away, embarrassed.

'You look really pretty,' he added shyly.

'Um, thanks. So why did Mr. Black pay you to come here?' I asked quickly, though I knew the answer.

Chiaz did not seem grateful for the subject change; he looked away, uncomfortable again. 'He said it was a 'safe' place to talk to you. I swear the old man is losing his mind.'

I joined in his laughter weakly.

'Anyway, he said that if I told you something, he would get me that master cylinder I need,' he confessed with a sheepish grin.

'Tell me, then. I want you to get your car finished.' I grinned back. At least Chiaz did not believe any of this. It made the situation a bit easier. Against the wall, Melvin was watching my face, his face expressionless. I saw a sophomore in a pink dress eyeing him with timid speculation, but he did not seem to be aware of her.

Chiaz looked away again, ashamed. 'Don't get mad, okay?'

'There's no way I'll be mad at you, Chiaz,' I assured him. 'I will not even be mad at Mr. Black. Just say what you must.'

'Well - this is so stupid, I am sorry, Lilla - he wants you to break up with your boyfriend. He asked me to tell you 'Please.' He shook his head in disgust.

'He's still superstitious, eh?'

'Yes. He was... over the top when you got hurt down in Phoenix. He did not believe...' Chiaz trailed off self- consciously.

My eyes narrowed. 'I fell.'

'I know that Chiaz said quickly.

'He thinks Melvin had something to do with me getting hurt.'  
It was not a question, and despite my promise, I was angry.

Chiaz would not meet my eyes. We did not even bother to sway to the music, though his hands were still on my waist, and mine around his neck.

'Look, Chiaz, I know Mr. Black will not believe this, but just so you know - he looked at me now, responding to the new earnestness in my voice - 'Melvin really did save my life. If it were not for Melvin and his father, I would be dead.'

'I know,' he claimed, but he sounded like my sincere words had affected him some. He would be able to convince Mr. Black of this much, at least.

'Hey, I'm sorry you had to come do this, Chiaz,' I apologized.  
'At any rate, you get your parts, right?'

'Yeah,' he muttered. He was still looking awkward... upset.

'There's more?' I asked in disbelief.

'Forget it,' he mumbled, 'I'll get a job and save the money myself.'

I glared at him until he met my gaze. 'Just spit it out, Chiaz.'

'It's so bad.'

'I do not care. Tell me,' I insisted.

'Okay... but, geez, this sounds bad.' He shook his head. 'He said to tell you, no, to warn you, that - and this is his plural, not mine - he lifted one hand from my waist and made little quotations marks in the air - 'We'll be watching.' He watched warily for my reaction.

It sounded like something from a mafia movie. I laughed aloud.

'Sorry you had to do this, Jake,' I snickered.

'I don't mind that much.' He grinned in relief. His eyes were appraising as they raked quickly over my dress. 'So, should I tell him you said to butt the hell out?' he asked hopefully.

'No,' I sighed. 'tell him I said thanks. I know he means well.'



The song ended, and I dropped my arms.

His hands hesitated at my waist, and he glanced at my bum leg. 'Do you want to dance again? Or can I help you get somewhere?'

Melvin answered me. 'That's all right, Chiaz. I will take it from here.'

Chiaz flinched and stared wide-eyed at Melvin, who stood just beside us.

'Hey, I didn't see you there,' he mumbled. 'I'll see you around, Lilla.' He stepped back, waving halfheartedly.

I smiled. 'Yeah, I'll see you later.'

'Sorry,' he said again before he turned for the door.

Melvin's arms wound around me as the next song started. It was a little up-tempo for slow dancing, but that did not seem to concern him. I leaned my head against his chest, content.

'Feeling better?' I teased.

'Not really,' he said tersely.

'Don't be mad at Mr. Black,' I sighed. 'He just worries about me for Charlie's sake. It is nothing personal.'

'I'm not mad at Mr. Black,' he corrected in a clipped voice.

'But his son is irritating me.'

I pulled back to look at him. His face was profoundly serious.

'Why?'

'First of all, he made me break my promise.'

I stared at him in confusion.

He half-smiled. 'I promised I wouldn't let go of you tonight,'  
he explained.

'Oh. Well, I forgive you.'

'Thanks. But there is something else.' Melvin frowned.

I waited patiently.

'He called you pretty,' he finally continued, his frown  
deepening. 'That's an insult, the way you look right now. You are much  
more than beautiful.'

I laughed. 'You might be a little biased.'

'I do not think that is it. Besides, I have excellent eyesight.'

We were twirling again, my feet on his as he held me close.

'So, are you going to explain the reason for all of this?' I wondered.

He looked down at me, confused, and I glared meaningfully at the crepe paper.

He considered for a moment and then changed direction, spinning me through the crowd to the back door of the gym. I caught a glimpse of Charity-Anna and Buddy dancing, staring at me curiously. Charity-Anna waved, and I smiled back quickly. Jeannette was there, too, looking blissfully happy in the arms of little Chiaz Naztherth; she did not look up from his eyes, a head lower than hers. Lee and Rebeca, Emily, glaring toward us, with Joseph Shaw; I could name every face that spiraled past me. And then we were outdoors, in the cool, dim light of a fading sunset.

As soon as we were alone, he swung me up into his arms and carried me across the dark grounds till he reached the bench beneath the shadow of the madrone trees. He sat there, keeping me cradled against his chest. The moon was already up, visible through the gauzy clouds, and his face glowed pale in the white light. His mouth was hard, his eyes troubled.

'The point?' I prompted softly.

He ignored me, staring up at the moon.

'Moonlight, again,' he murmured. 'Another ending. No matter how perfect the day is, it always must end.'

'Some things don't have to end,' I muttered through my teeth, instantly tense.

He sighed.

'I took you to the prom,' he said slowly, finally answering my question, 'because I do not want you to miss anything. I do not want my presence to take anything away from you if I can help it. I want you to be human. I want your life to continue as it would have if I had died in nineteen- fourteen like I should have.'

I shuddered at his words and then shook my head angrily. 'In what strange parallel dimension would I ever have gone to prom of my own free will? If you were not a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with this.'

He smiled briefly, but it did not touch his eyes. 'It wasn't so bad, you said so yourself.'

'That's because I was with you.'

We were quiet for a minute; he stared at the moon, and I stared at him. I wished there were some way to explain how very uninterested I was in normal human life.

'Will you tell me something?' he asked, glancing down at me with a slight smile.

'Don't I always?'

'Just promise you will tell me,' He insisted, grinning.

I knew I was going to regret this instantly. 'Fine.'

'You seemed honestly surprised when you figured out that I was taking you here,' he began.

'I was,' I interjected.

'Exactly,' he agreed. 'But you must have had some other theory... I am curious - what did you think I was dressing you up for?'

Yes, instant regret. I pursed my lips, hesitating. 'I don't want to tell you.'

'You promised,' he objected.

'I know.'

'What's the problem?'

I knew he thought it was mere embarrassment holding me back. 'I think it will make you mad - or sad.'

His brows pulled together over his eyes as he thought that through. 'I still want to know. Please?'

I sighed. He waited.

'Well... I assumed it was some kind of... occasion. But I did not think it would be some trite human thing... prom!' I scoffed.

'Human?' he asked flatly. He had noticed the keyword.

I looked down at my dress, fidgeting with a stray piece of chiffon. He waited in silence.

'Okay,' I confessed in a rush. 'So, I was hoping that you might have changed your mind... that you were going to change me, after all.'

A dozen emotions played across his face. Some I recognized- anger... pain... and then he seemed to collect himself and his expression became amused.

'You thought that would be a black- tie occasion, didn't you?' he teased, touching the lapel of his tuxedo jacket.

I scowled to hide my embarrassment. 'I do not know how these things work. To me, at least, it seems more rational than prom does.'  
He was still grinning. 'It's not funny,' I said.

'No, you're right, it's not,' he agreed, his smile fading. 'I'd rather treat it like a joke, though, than believe you're serious.'

'But I am serious.'

He sighed deeply. 'I know. And you are really that willing?'

The pain was back in his eyes. I bit my lip and nodded.

'So ready for this to be the end,' he murmured, to himself, 'for this to be the twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You are ready to give up everything.'

'It's not the end, it's the beginning,' I disagreed under my breath.

'I'm not worth it,' he said sadly.

'Do you remember when you told me that I didn't see myself very clearly?' I asked, raising my eyebrows. 'You obviously have the same blindness.'

'I know what I am.'

I sighed.

But his mercurial mood shifted on me. He pursed his lips, and his eyes were probing. He examined my face for a long moment.

'You're ready now, then?' He asked.

'Um.' I gulped. 'Yes?'

He smiled and inclined his head slowly until his cold lips brushed against the skin just under the corner of my jaw.

'Right now?' he whispered, his breath blowing cool on my neck. I shivered involuntarily.

'Yes,' I whispered, so my voice would not have a chance to break. If he thought I was bluffing, he was going to be disappointed. I had already made this decision, and- I was sure. It did not matter that my body was rigid as a plank, my hands balled into fists, my breathing erratic...

He chuckled darkly and leaned away. His face did look disappointed.

'You can't really believe that I would give in so easily,' he said with a sour edge to his mocking tone.



'A girl can dream a little, that is what my siter would have said.'

His eyebrows rose. 'Is that what you dream about? Being a monster?'

'Not exactly,' I said, frowning at his word choice. Monster, indeed. 'Mostly I dream about being with you forever.'

His expression changed, softened, and saddened by the subtle ache in my voice.

'Lilla.' His fingers lightly traced the shape of my lips. 'I will stay with you - isn't that enough?'

I smiled under his fingertips. 'Enough for now.'

He frowned at my tenacity. No one was going to surrender tonight. He execrated, and the sound was a growl.

I handled his face. 'Look,' I said. 'I love you more than everything else in the world connected. Isn't that adequate?'

'Affirmative, it is sufficient,' he responded, beaming. 'Adequately for evermore.'

And he tilted down to squeeze his lifeless lips once more to my lips, with the rays of moonlight shining within the windowpanes.

'Do you need any help finding your next class?'

'I am headed to the gym. I think I can find it.'

'That's my next class, too.' He seemed thrilled, though it was not that big of a coincidence in a school this small.

We walked to class together; he was a chatterer - he supplied most of the conversation, which made it easy for me. He had lived in California till he was ten, so he knew how I felt about the sun. It turned out he was in my English class also. He was the nicest person I had met today.

But as we were entering the gym, he asked, 'So, did you stab Melvin Shezor with a pencil or what? I have never seen him act like that.'

I cringed. So, I was not the only one who had noticed. And that was not Melvin Shezor's usual behavior. I decided to play dumb.

'Was that the boy I sat next to in Biology?' I asked artlessly.

'Yes,' he said. 'He looked like he was in pain or something.'

'I don't know,' I responded. 'I never spoke to him.'

'He's a weird guy.' Buddy lingered by me instead of heading to the dressing room. 'If I were lucky enough to sit by you, I would have talked to you.'

I smiled at him before walking through the girls' locker room door. He was friendly and admirable. But it was not enough to ease my irritation.

The Gym teacher, Coach Clapp, found me a uniform but did not make me dress down for today's class. At home, only two years of RE. were needed. Here, PE was mandatory for all four years. McAuley was my hell on Earth.

I watched four volleyball games running simultaneously. Remembering how many injuries I had sustained - and inflicted - playing volleyball, I felt faintly nauseated.

The final Lily rang at last. I walked slowly to the office to return my paperwork. The rain had drifted away, but the wind was strong and colder. I wrapped my arms around myself.

When I walked into the warm office, I turned around and walked back out.

Melvin Shezor stood at the desk in front of me. I recognized again that tousled bronze hair. He did not appear to notice the sound of my entrance. I stood pressed against the back wall, waiting for the receptionist to be free.

He was arguing with her in a low, attractive voice. I quickly picked up the gist of the argument. He was trying to trade from sixth-hour Biology to another time - any other time.

I just could not believe that this was about me. It had to be something else, something that happened before I entered the biology room. The look on his face must have been about another aggravation entirely. It was impossible that this stranger could take such a sudden, intense dislike for me.

The door opened again, and the chilly wind suddenly gusted through the room, rustling the papers on the desk, and swirling my hair around my face. The girl who came in merely stepped to the desk, placed a note in the wire basket, and walked out again. But Melvin Shezor's back stiffened, and he turned slowly to glare at me - his face was absurdly handsome - with piercing, hate-filled eyes. For an instant, I felt a thrill of genuine fear, raising the hair on my arms. The look only lasted a second,

but it chilled me more than the freezing wind. He turned back to the receptionist.

'Never mind, then,' he said hastily in a voice like velvet. 'I can see that it is impossible. Thank you so much for your help.' And he turned on his heel without another look at me and disappeared out the door.

I went meekly to the desk, my face white for once instead of red, and handed her the signed slip.

'How did your first day go, dear?' the receptionist asked maternally.

'Fine,' I lied, my voice weak. She did not look convinced.

When I got to the car, it was the last car in the lot. It seemed like a haven, already the closest thing to home I had in this damp green hole. I sat inside for a while, just staring out the windshield blankly. But soon I was cold enough to need the heater, so I turned the key and the engine roared to life. I headed back to Charlie's house, fighting tears the whole way there, walking along the tracks after the car broke down.

3 PAGES

BETTER... WORSE. Much better because it has not rained yet, although the clouds are thick and dark. It is easier because I know

what to expect in my day. Buddy sat next to me in English and took me to the next class, and the chess club J.A kept watching him. This is annoying. People do not look at me like they did yesterday. I sat with a large group at lunch, including Buddy, J.A, Charity-Anna, and a few others whose names and faces I now remember. I started to feel like I was treading water, not drowning.

Worse because I was tired. I still cannot sleep, the air echoes in the house. To make matters worse, when I did not raise my hand, Mr. DeVolcano called me with Trig, and I got the wrong answer. It was a pain because I had to play volleyball and once, I missed the ball and hit my friend in the head with it. To make matters worse, Melvin Shezor did not go to school at all.

I have been dreading lunch all morning for its weird glitter. Part of me wanted to confront him and demand to know what his problem was. As I lay in bed with insomnia, I imagined what I would say. But I know myself so well I have the guts to do it. I made the timid lion look like an exterminator.

But when I walked into the cafe with Charity-Anna - I tried to keep my eyes from scanning his seat and failed miserably - I saw four of his brothers sitting at the same table and he was not there.

Buddy greeted us and took us to his table. Charity-Anna seemed excited about the attention, and her friends were quick to join us. But when I tried to listen to their whispers, I felt extremely uncomfortable and nervously waited for that moment to come. I hope he ignores me when he comes and proves my suspicions are false.

She did not come, and I got increasingly nervous as time went on.

When lunch was over, and he still was not there, I went into biology with more confidence. Buddy, with golden retriever qualities, walked faithfully by my side in class. I held my breath at the door, but neither was Melvin Shezor. I execrated and went back to my seat. Buddy followed, talking about an upcoming trip to the beach. He stood by my desk until Lily rang. Then she gave me a wry smile and sat down next to a girl with badly permed bangs. It looks like I must do something for Buddy, it is not easy. In a city where everyone lives above everyone else, diplomacy is essential. I have never been overly cautious. I am not used to dealing with overly friendly people.

I felt relieved in Melvin's absence. I tell myself repeatedly. But I could not shake that lingering suspicion that I was the reason for his

absence. It is ridiculous and selfish to think that I can touch someone so hard. It is out of the question. Yet I cannot help but worry that this is true.

The school days are finally over, the volleyball incident has removed the flush from my cheeks, and I quickly switched back to jeans and a blue sweater. I hurried out of the girls' locker room, delighted to discover that I had temporarily managed to escape my hound friend. I hurried to the parking lot. Now it is crowded with fleeing students. I got in my car, opened my bag, and made sure I had what I needed.

Last night I found out that Charlie does not cook much except fried eggs and bacon. So, I asked for kitchen details to be assigned during my stay. He was willing to give him the keys to the banquet hall. I also learned that he had no food at home. So, I had my shopping list and money in a jar labeled 'Food, Money' in my cupboard, and I went to Thriftway.

I killed my deafening machine for the rest of my life, turning my head in disregard, and tumbled cautiously into a spot in a queue of cars waiting to pull out of the parking lot. As I waited, trying to pretend the tinnitus was coming from someone else's car, I saw two twins Shezor and Mercado get into their car. That is the shiny new Volvo. certainly. I had not noticed their clothes before - I was obsessed with their faces. Looking



at it now, everyone is well-dressed. Simple, but the clothing subtly hints at the designer's origins. With their striking looks and the style, they carry, they can put on a rag and take it off. To them, having looks and money seems like too much. But life is like that most of the time. There do not seem to be any admissions bought here.

No, I do not think so. Isolation must be their desire. I cannot imagine any door not opening with this level of beauty.

They looked at my humming car as I passed them, and so did everyone else. When I finally came out of campus, my eyes remained straight and relieved.

Thriftway is not too far from the school, just a few streets south of the highway. Nice to be inside the supermarket. It feels normal. I was shopping at home and happily fell into familiar task patterns. The store is so big that I cannot hear the rain hitting the roof, reminding me where I am.

When I get home, I unload all the groceries and stuff them wherever I can find an open space. I hope Charlie does not mind. I wrapped the potatoes in foil, cooked them in the oven, coated the steak with the marinade, and put it on top of a carton of eggs in the fridge.

After that, I went upstairs with my bag. Before starting work, I checked my e- mail for the first time in a dry undershirt, with my damp hair in a ponytail. I got three messages.

'Lilla,' Mother wrote...

texting me as soon as I walked in the door. Let me know how your flight is. It is raining and I already miss you. I am about to pack my bags for California, but I cannot find my pink top. Do you know where I put it? Deann said hello. Mom...

I sighed and went to the next one. Eight hours after the first send.

'Lilla,' he wrote...

Why haven't you emailed me yet? What are you waiting for? Mom's last one was this morning.

Lill, if I do not hear from you by 6- 06 this afternoon, I will call Charlie.

I checked the clock. I still have an hour to go, but my mom is known for getting ahead.

Mom, calm down. I am writing now. Do not do anything rash.

Lilla.

I send it and start over.

Mother, everything is fine. Of course, it rained. I am waiting to write something. The school is not bad, a bit repetitive. I met some nice people sitting next to me at lunch. Your T- shirt is in the dry cleaner's - you should have picked it up on Friday.

Charlie bought me a car; can you believe it? I like. It is old but strong, and that is fine with me, you know.

I miss him too. I will be writing again soon, but I am not going to check my email every five minutes. Relax and breathe. I love you. Lilla.

I decided to read Wuthering Heights again - the novel we are currently studying in English - for fun, and I did when Charlie came home. I forgot the time and hurried downstairs to get the potatoes out and cook the steak.

'Lilla?' My mom called when she heard my voice on the stairs.

Who else? I wonder.

'Hey Dad, welcome home.'

‘Yet all my life my true dad to me was Nadalin's as it was mine being Titus Black

'Thanks.' As I entered the kitchen, he buckled his gun and stepped out of his boots. He never fired a gun at work. But he was ready. When I came here as a kid, he always took out bullets as soon as he walked in the door. He thinks I am old enough now not to accidentally shoot myself or to shoot on purpose in desperation.

'What's for dinner?' he asked cautiously. My mother was an imaginative cook, and her experiments were not always edible. I was surprised and sad that he seemed to remember so much.

'Steak and chips,' I replied, looking relieved.

He was standing in the kitchen doing nothing, looking uncomfortable. While I was working, he clumsily walked into the living room to watch TV. It made us both more comfortable. I made the salad while the steak was cooking and set the table.

I called him when dinner was ready, and he sniffed gratefully as he entered the room.

'Smells good, Lily.'

'Thanks.'

We ate in silence for a few minutes. It is pleasant. Neither of our minds was quiet. Somehow, we were destined to live together.

'So, what do you think of school? Have you made friends?' he asked as time passed.

'Well, I was in class with a girl named Charity-Anna. I was having lunch with her friend. And this guy, Buddy, was very friendly. They all seemed fine.' With one notable exception.

'It must be Buddy Newton. Nice guy- good family. His father owns a sporting goods store out of town. He makes a good living off all the travelers who pass by.'

'Do you know the Shezor?' I asked hesitantly...

'Dr. Shezor's family? Of course. Dr. Shezor is a nice guy.'

'These... kids...are a little different. They do not seem to fit in well with school.'

Charlie's angry look surprised me.

'People in this town,' he murmured. 'Dr. Shezor is a fantastic surgeon, he could probably work in any hospital in the world and pay ten

times what he pays here,' he continued, growing louder. 'We're lucky to have him - lucky his wife wants to live in a small town. He is an asset to the community and all these people are kind and gentle. When they first moved in, I was skeptical, all that Adopted teens. I think we might have some issues with them. But they are all mature - I have not had a single issue. For some kinds of people living in this place, that is more than I can say More'

This is the longest speech I have ever heard from Charlie. He must feel strongly about everything people say.

I am back; 'they are fine. I just noticed them holding theirs. They are both attractive,' I added, trying to be more complimenting.

'You should see a doctor,' Charlie said with a smile. 'Thankfully, he is happily married. Many nurses in the hospital find it hard to concentrate working with him.'

After dinner, we fell silent again. He cleared the table when I started to eat my plate. She turned on the TV, and after I washed the dishes with my hands- not the dishwasher- I reluctantly went upstairs to do the math. I can feel a tradition taking shape. That night was finally quiet. I fell asleep quickly, exhausted.

The rest of the week is quiet. I am used to my classroom routines. By Friday, I could recognize every student in the school by name, if not by name. In the gym, the guys on my team learned not to pass the ball to me, and if the opponent tried to exploit my weakness, they would come up to me quickly. I happily avoided them.

Melvin Shezor did not return to school.

Every day I watch anxiously as the rest of the Karen family enter the cafeteria without him. Then I can relax and join the lunchtime conversation. It revolves around a two-week trip to La Push Marine Park with Buddy. I was invited and agreed to go, more out of politeness than desire. Beaches should be warm and dry.

By Friday, I could walk into my biology class without worrying about Melvin being there. He has dropped out of school. I try not to think about him, but I cannot help worrying about his continued absence, which seems ridiculous.

My first weekend on Fox was peaceful. Charlie is not used to spending time in the usually empty house and works most of the weekend. I cleaned the house, started my homework, and wrote my mom the happiest email. I went to the library on Saturday, but I was too weak to get

a card. I should make an appointment to go to Olympia or Altoona asap and find a good bookstore. I was casually wondering what kind of gas the car was on... shuddering just thinking about it.

The rain over the weekend was mild and calm, so I slept well.

On Monday morning, people greeted me in the parking lot. I do not know all their names, but I waved and smiled at them. It was cold this morning, but luckily it did not rain. Buddy sat in the usual seat next to me in English. We did a quiz at Wuthering Heights. It is simple, extremely easy.

Overall, so far, I feel much more comfortable than I thought. I feel more comfortable here than I expected.

As we left the classroom, white swirls filled the air. I could hear people shouting at each other excitedly. The wind blows across my cheeks and my nose.

'Wow,' Buddy said. 'It's snowing.'

I looked at the little fluff that formed on the sidewalk, whirling irregularly in front of me.

'Hah.' Snow. This is where my good day goes.



He glanced surprised. 'Don't you like snow?'

'No. That means it is too cold to rain.' Of course. 'Also, I think it should be fragmented - - you know, each one is unique. These look like the end of Q- tips.'

'Have you never seen snow before?' he said in disbelief asked.

'Of course, I have.' I stopped. 'On TV.'

Buddy smiled. Then a big, messy snowball landed on the back of his head. We all turned around to see where it came from. I was suspicious of J.A, he walked away with his back to us - his next class went the wrong way. Buddy had the same idea. He bent down and started scraping up a white mush.

'I'll see you at lunch, okay?' I said as I continued walking. 'As soon as people start throwing wet things, I'll step in.'

He just shook his head, and his eyes fell on J. A's retreating figure.

All morning everyone was talking excitedly about catching snow. It was the first snow of the new year. I closed my mouth. Of course, it is drier than rain - until it melts into the socks.

After Spanish, I willingly went for coffee with Charity-Anna. Porridge balls fly everywhere. I have a paper clip in hand, ready to use it as a shield if needed. Charity-Anna thought I was joking, but something in my expression stopped her from throwing snowballs at me herself.

Buddy caught up to us as we walked through the gate, laughing as the ice melted the spikes in his hair. He and Charity-Anna happily chatted about snowball fights as we queued for groceries. Out of habit, I glanced at the table in the corner. Then I froze in place. There are five people at the table.

Charity-Anna took my hand.

'Hello? Lilla? What do you want?'

I looked down. My ears are hot. I have no reason to feel self-conscious, I remind me. I did nothing wrong.

'Where's Lilla?' Buddy asked Charity-Anna.

'Nothing,' I replied. 'I'm only drinking soda today.' I have reached the end.

'Aren't you hungry?' Charity-Anna asked.

'Actually, I feel a little sick,' I said, keeping my eyes on the floor.

I waited for them to get the food, then followed them to a table with my eyes on my feet table.

I drank the soda slowly and my stomach was churning. Buddy twice asked me how I was feeling with unnecessary worry.

I waited for them to get their food and then followed them to the table, eyes on their feet.

I slowly sip my soda, my stomach rumbling. Buddy asked twice with unnecessary concern how I was feeling. I told her it was nothing, but I wondered if I should play it off and run to the nurse's office for the next hour. funny I should not run away. I decided to allow myself a look at the Shezor family table. If he looked at me, I would skip biology like a coward.

I lowered my head and looked under my eyelids. None of them looked that way. I raised my head a little. They laughed. Melvin, Jae, and Dejen all had hair full of melted snow. Naddalin Natalie and Vivian leaned away as Dejen waved his dripping hair at them. They enjoyed the

snowy day like everyone else - they looked more like a scene from a movie than the rest of us.

But there was something else besides laughter and jokes, and I could not pinpoint what that difference was. I studied Melvin most attentively. Her skin was less pale, I decided - flushed from fighting the snow - the circles under her eyes were less noticeable. But there was more. I thought, squinting, trying to distinguish the change.

'Lilla, what are you looking at?' Charity-Anna broke in, her eyes following mine.

At that moment, his eyes locked on mine. I lowered my head, letting my hair fall to hide my face. But I was sure when our eyes met that he did not seem as stern or friendly as the last time I saw him. He again just looked curious, somehow displeased.

'Melvin Shezor is staring at you,' Charity-Anna whispered into my ear.

'He doesn't show anger, does he?' I could not help but ask.

'No,' he said, confused by my question. 'What should he do?'

'I don't think she likes me,' I admitted. I still felt bad. I put my head on my hands.

'The Shezor do not like anyone... well, they do not notice anyone enough to like them. But he still looks at you.'

'Don't look at him,' I whispered.

He smiled but looked away. I raised my head to see if he saw and considered violence if he resisted.

Buddy then interrupted us - he was planning an epic blizzard battle in the parking lot after school and wanted us to join. Charity-Anna enthusiastically agrees. The way he looked at Buddy left no doubt that he was ready for whatever he suggested. I remained silent. I should hide in the gym until the parking lot is clear.

I carefully kept my eyes on my desk for the rest of the lunch hour. I decided to honor the deal I made with myself. Since he did not look angry, I went to biology. My stomach turned a little at the thought of sitting next to him again.

I usually did not want to walk into class with Buddy like I did- he seemed like a popular target for snowball snipers- but when we walked in the door, everyone but me sighed. It rained and washed away all traces of snow from the edge of the sidewalk to clear, icy strips. I pulled up my hood, secretly happy. I could easily go straight home after the gym.

During the construction of the four buildings, Buddy received several complaints.

Entering the classroom, I was relieved to find my desk still empty. Mr. Trudeau walked around the room and distributed a microscope and a box of slides to each table. Class did not start for a few minutes and the room was buzzing with conversation. I looked away from the door and looked at the cover of my notebook.

I could very clearly hear the chair next to me move, but my eyes were deeply focused on the pattern I was drawing.

'Hello,' said a soft musical voice.

I looked up, startled to find him talking to me. He sat as far from me as the table would allow, but his chair was angled towards me. Her hair was wet, disheveled - yet she looked like she had just finished shooting a hair gel ad. Her shiny face was friendly, open, a slight smile on her flawless lips. But his eyes were alert.

'My name is Melvin Shezor,' he continued. 'I did not get a chance to introduce myself last week. You are Lilla Natalie-Black.'

My mind was spinning in confusion. Did I make the whole thing up? He is completely polite now. I had to speak; She waited. But I could not say anything normal.

'How did you know my name?' I stammered.

He smiled a soft, bewitching smile.

'Oh, everyone knows your name. The whole town is waiting for your arrival.'

I frowned. I knew it was something like that.

'No,' I continued nonchalantly. 'I was wondering why you called me Lilla?'

He looked confused. 'Do you like Lill?'

'No, I like Lilla,' I said. 'But I think Charlie - I mean my dad - should call me Lill backwards - that's how everyone here knows me,' I tried to explain, feeling like a total idiot.

'Whoa.' He dropped it. I looked away awkwardly.

Fortunately, Mr. Trudeau started the lesson at that moment. I tried to concentrate as he explained the lab we were doing today. The slides in the box were growing. Working as lab partners, we had to

separate slides of onion root tip cells into their representative stages of mitosis and label them accordingly. We were not allowed to use books. In twenty minutes, he comes to see who is right.

'Begin,' he ordered.

'Ladies first partner?' Melvin asked. I looked up to see him smiling such a cute, crooked smile that I could only stare at him like an idiot.

'Or I can start if you want.' The smile faded; He was wondering if I was mentally capable.

'No,' I said shyly. 'I'm moving on.'

I showed up, just a little. I had already done this lab and knew what I was looking for. It would be easy. I slid the first slide under the microscope and quickly adjusted it to the 40X objective. I took a quick look at the slides.

My assessment was confident. 'Professor.'

'Do you mind if I see?' He asked as I began to remove the slide. He held out his hand to stop me as he asked. His fingers are icy cold, as if he has been holding them in the snow before class. But because of



that, I did not move my hand so quickly. When he touched me, it stung my hand as an electric current went through us.

'I'm sorry,' he mumbled, at once removing his hand. Still, he kept reaching for the telescope. I was still staring at him in shock as he studied the slide for less time than I did.

'Professor,' he agreed, writing it neatly in the first place on our worksheet. He quickly switched off the first slide for the second, then glanced briefly.

'Anaphase,' he muttered, writing it down as he spoke.

I kept my voice indifferent. 'Can I?'

He smiled and held out the microscope to me.

I looked eagerly through the eyepiece but was disappointed. Damn, she was right.

'Slide there?' I extended my hand without looking at him.

He handed it to me; He seemed careful not to touch my skin again.

I took the briefest glimpse I could manage.

'Interim phase.' I gave him the microscope before he could ask for it. He took a quick look and then wrote it down. I would have written it while he watched, but his clear and elegant script intimidated me. I did not want to ruin the page with my clumsy scribbling.

We finished before anyone else came around. I could see that Buddy and his partner were comparing two slides and another group had the book open under the table.

Which left me with no choice but to try not to look at him...failing. I looked up and he was looking at me with the same indescribable look of despair in his eyes. Suddenly I detected this subtle difference in her face.

'Did you get the introduction?' I blurted it out without thinking.

He was taken aback by my sudden question. 'No.'

'Oh,' I mumbled. 'I thought you had something else in your eye.'

He shrugged and looked away.

I was sure there was something different. I vividly remembered the flat black color of her eyes the last time she saw me, the

color standing out against her pale skin and auburn hair. Today, her eyes were an assorted color- a range ocher, darker than butter polish, but with the same golden hue. I could not see how that could be unless he lied about the acquaintance for some reason. Or the McAuley drove me crazy.

I looked down. His hands clenched into tight fists again.

Mr. Trudeau then came to our table asking why we were not working. He looked over our shoulders at the finished lab, then looked deeper to check the answers.

'So, Melvin, didn't you think Lill should have a chance at the microscope?' asked Mr. Trudeau.

'Lilla,' Melvin corrected automatically. 'In fact, he identified three of the five.'

Mr. Trudeau now looked at me; His expression was suspicious.

'Have you done this lab before?' she asked.

I smiled worriedly. 'Not with onion root.'

'Sig Blastula?'

'Yes.'

Mr. Trudeau shook his head. 'Did you attend the Advanced Placement program in Phoenix?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' he said after a moment, 'it's a good thing you two are lab partners.' He mumbled something else as he left. After he left, I started drawing again in my notebook.

'The snow is so bad, isn't it?' Melvin asked. I felt like he was making small talk with me. Paranoia came over me again. As if he overheard my conversation with Charity-Anna at lunch and was trying to prove me wrong.

'Not really,' I answered honestly, not pretending to be normal like everyone else. I was still trying to fight the nagging feeling of doubt and could not concentrate.

'You don't like the cold.' It was not a question.

'Or wet.'

'McAuley must be a tough place for you to live,' he reasoned.

'You have no idea,' I muttered darkly.

He was impressed by what I said, for some reason, I could not imagine. His look was so confused that I tried not to look more than polite.

"Then why are you here?"

No one asked me - not directly, as he claimed.

'It's complicated.'

'I think I can go on,' he pressed.

I paused for a moment and then made the mistake of meeting his gaze. His dark golden eyes confused me, and I answered without thinking.

'My mother remarried,' I said.

'It doesn't sound that complicated,' she disagreed, but suddenly felt sympathy. 'When did that happen?'

'Last September.' My voice sounded sad, even for me.

'And you don't like him,' Melvin surmised, his tone still kind.

'No, Phil's fine. Too short, but nice enough.'

'Why didn't you stay with them?'

I do not understand his interest, but he looks at me with piercing eyes, as if my dull life story is somehow important.

'Deann travels a lot. He plays ball for a living.' I half smiled.

'Did I hear him?' He asked with a smile in response.

'Not. He is not playing well. Strictly minor league. Moves a lot.'

'And your mother sent you here so you could travel with her.' Again, he said this as a hypothesis, not a question.

My chin went up a fraction. 'No, he did not send me here. I sent it myself.'

His brows knit together. 'I don't understand,' he admitted, needlessly frustrated by the truth.

I sighed. Why did I explain this to him? He continued to look at me with obvious curiosity.

'She was with me at first but missed him. It made her sad...so I decided it was time to spend some quality time with Charlie.'

My voice was sad after I finished.

'But now you are sad,' he pointed out.

'And?' I challenged.

'It doesn't seem fair.' He shrugged, but his eyes were still intense.

I laughed and laughed. 'Didn't anyone ever tell you? Life is not fair.'

'I've heard that somewhere before,' he agreed dryly.

'So that's it,' I insisted, wondering why he was still looking at me like that.

His gaze wandered appraisingly. 'You made a good showing,' he said slowly. 'But I bet you've suffered more than you let anyone see.'

I looked at him, resisting the urge to stick my tongue out like a five-year-old, and looked away.

'Am I wrong?'

I tried to ignore him.

'I didn't think so,' she muttered.

'Why do you care?' I asked, annoyed. I averted my eyes and saw the teacher making her rounds.

'That's a very good question,' he murmured so quietly, that I wondered if he was talking to himself. But after a few seconds of silence, I decided that was the only answer I could get.

I sighed, frowning at the board.

'Am I bothering you?' she asked. He sounded amused.

I looked at him without thinking... and told the truth again. 'Not really. I am more annoyed with myself. My face is too easy to read. Mother always calls me her open book.' I frowned.

'Upon, I find you very hard to read.' Despite everything I said and thought, he meant it.

'Then you must be a good reader,' I replied.

'Usually.' He smiled widely, flashing perfect, ultra-white teeth.

Mr. Trudeau then called the class to order, and I listened with relief. I could not believe I explained my miserable life to this strangely cute boy who may or may not hate me. He seemed engrossed in our conversation, but now out of the corner of my eye, I saw him leaning away from me again, his hands gripping the edge of the table with vague excitement.



I tried to concentrate as Mr. Trudeau showed with overhead transparency what I saw through the microscope without difficulty. But my thoughts were uncontrollable.

When Lily finally rang, Melvin left the room as quickly and gracefully as he had last Monday. And just like last Monday, I looked back at her in amazement.

Buddy quickly jumped to my side and grabbed my book for me. I imagine him with a wagging tail.

'It was terrible,' she sighs. 'They all look the same. You are lucky to have Shezor as your partner.'

'I had no problem with that,' I said, surprised at his assumption. I at once regretted it. 'I've done labs before though,' I added before she could hurt her feelings.

'Shezor seemed friendly enough today,' he commented as we shouldered our raincoats. He was not happy about it.

I tried to sound indifferent. 'I wonder what happened to him last Monday.'

I could not focus on what Buddy was talking about as we walked toward the gym and RE. Did not do much to grab my attention.

Buddy was on my team today. He boldly covered both my position and his, so that my shelling was interrupted only when it was my turn to serve; Whenever I got up my team carefully moved out of the way.

When I got to the parking lot, the rain was just mist, but I was more than happy to be in a dry cabin. I once ignored the mind-numbing roar of the engine and turned on the heater. I took off my jacket, pulled down the hood, and combed my wet hair so the curlers could dry it on the way home.

I looked around to make sure it was clear. Then I noticed a motionless white figure. Melvin Shezor was leaning against the front door of the Cadillac, three cars down from me, staring at me intently. I quickly looked away and threw the car in reverse, almost hitting a rusty Toyota Corolla in my haste. Fortunately for Toyota, I hit the brakes in time. It was the kind of car that would scrap my car. I took a deep breath, still looking at the other side of my car, and cautiously pulled out again with more success. I looked straight ahead as the Volvo passed, but from the view outside I could have sworn I saw him smiling.

#### 4 Marvel

I open my eyes in the morning, some things are different. This is light; there was still a grey-blue glow in the overcast forest sky, but

somehow it was more obvious. I realized that there is no fog covering my window. He jumped up and looked out, then sighed in horror. A thin layer of snow covered the yard and dust covered the top of my car, turning the road white. But that is not the worst part. All the rain yesterday froze the solids. the needle covering of the trees in gorgeous ornate patterns made the highway icy to death. I find it hard not to fall when the ground is dry. Now it may be safe for me to sleep again. Charlie had gone to work before I got off. In many ways, living with Charlie was more like my own place, and I feel lonelier than alone. I threw a bowl of cereal and some orange juice out of the carton. I was incredibly happy to go to school, which scared me.

I knew it was not the exciting learning environment I was expecting or seeing my new friends. If I am honest with myself, I know I want to go to school because I am going to meet Melvin Shezor. It is very stupid. After my strange and confusing conversation yesterday, I should have avoided it entirely. I doubt. Why is he lying in his eyes? I was still afraid that I would feel animosity toward him at times, and my tongue still hung over when I imagined his perfect face. I know full well that my league and my league are balls that do not touch the ball. So, I should not rush to see him today. It took every ounce of concentration I had to make

it alive on the icy brick trail. When I finally got into the car, I almost lost my balance, but I managed to grab the rearview mirror and save myself. Today is going to be a nightmare. As I drove to school, I was distracted from the fear of falling and the unnecessary speculation about Melvin Shezor, thinking about Buddy and J.A., and the stark contrast between the teenage boys here and me. I am sure I look like I did in Phoenix. It is just because the boys back home slowly followed me through all the awkward teenage phases and still think of me that way. Probably because I am new here where repairs are exceedingly rare.

My horrendous clumsiness was seen as mild rather than pathetic, causing me to turn into a troubled teenage girl. Whatever the reason, Buddy's puppyish behavior and J. A's clear rivalry with him are troubling. I am not sure if I do not like being ignored. My car had no problem with the ice covering the road. I drove slowly, though I did not want to cut a path of destruction down the street, and when I got out of the school car, I realized why I was in so little trouble. Something silver caught my eye and I walked to the back of the car, carefully holding onto its sides for support, to check my tires. It is surrounded by thin chains that intersect in the shape of a diamond. Charlie woke up early knowing how early it was to put snow chains on my car. Suddenly I felt the tension in

my throat. I was not used to being looked after, and Charlie's unspoken fears surprised me. I was standing in the back corner of the car, struggling to react to the sudden sensation that came with the snow chains, when I heard a strange sound. It was a loud cry, and it quickly became painful.

I looked up and was amazed. I saw several things at the same time. In slow motion, nothing moves like in a movie. Instead, the adrenaline rush seemed to make my brain work faster and I was able to clearly understand several things at once. Melvin Shezor stopped four cars away from me and looked at me in horror. His face appeared from the pile of faces, all frozen in the same mask of shock. But more important was the dark blue car skidding, tires locked, screeching on the brakes, and rolling wildly on the ice in the parking lot. He was about to hit the back corner of my car and I was standing between them. I did not even manage to close my eyes. Just before I heard a crunch around the car bay, something hit me hard, but not in the direction I expected. My head hit the cold black top and I felt something hard and cold hanging me from the ground. I lay down on the sidewalk behind the brown car parked next to me. But I had no chance to notice anything else because the car was still coming. It was curled up on the end of the car, still twisting and sliding, about to hit me again. A low oath made me realize that someone was with me, and the

voice was unrecognizable. Two long white arms roared in front of me, the car came to a screeching halt, and a foot in front of me, a large hand respectfully in the deep recesses in the side of the car's body.

Then his hand moved so fast it was not clear. Suddenly a man grabbed the body of the car, and something pulled me and swung my legs like knives until they hit the black tires. A metallic whine hit my ears, the car stopped, the window rattled, and it hit the asphalt, just a second before where my feet had been. It was completely silent for a second before the screams started. Suddenly in bed, I heard more than one person calling my name. But clearer than all the screams, I could hear Melvin Shezor's low, angry voice in my ear. Pera? Are you OK? 'I am well. My voice sounded strange. I tried to sit up and realized that he was holding me by the side of his body, holding him with a barbell.' Be careful, warn me of suffering. 'You hit hard. I began to understand the throbbing pain above my left ear.' 'Oops,' I said in surprise. That is what I thought.

Surprisingly, her voice sounded like a choking laugh. Like... 'I walked!' away, trying to clear my mind and figure out where I am.' How did you get here so fast? 'I stand by your Lilla,' he said, his tone serious again. I turned and sat up, this time allowing myself to loosen the bonds he had wrapped around my waist, as far away from me as possible in the

confined space. with his golden eyes. What do I ask him? Then they found us, and a bunch of people started crying, yelling at each other, and yelling at us. 'Don't move,' said one of them. Taylor got out of the car, the others screamed, and there was a flurry of activity around us. I tried to stand up, but Melvin's cold hand pushed my shoulder down. Stay where you are now. But it is cold,' I complained. I was surprised when he held his breath. His voice has an edge, you are there,' I suddenly remembered, and his laughter stopped. 'You're next to your car.' His expression changed. very tough. I could hear the hoarse voices of adults arriving on the scene. However, I stand by our arguments. I was right, and he will admit it. Lilla, I am with you, I pushed you. He unleashed the full force of his devastating eyes on me as if trying to convey something vital.

I threw a bowl of cereal and orange juice out of the box. I was excited to go to school and it scared me. I knew it was not the learning environment or meeting new friends I was hoping for. If I were honest with myself, I knew I wanted to go to school because I would have met Melvin Shezor. And it was very stupid.

After the brainless and embarrassing thing, I said yesterday, I must avoid him completely. And I suspected him; why should he lie with his eyes? I was still afraid of her hostility at times, and her tongue was still

tied every time I imagined her perfect face. I understood my league and he was an impenetrable sphere. So, I do not have to worry about seeing him today. Focused on staying alive on the ice brick road. When I finally got to the car, I nearly lost my balance, but managed to save myself by clinging to the side mirror. Today is going to be a nightmare.

As I walked to school, I distracted myself from my fear of falling and unwanted speculation about Melvin Shezor, Buddy, and J.A, and the obvious contrast in how the teenage boys reacted to me. I was sure I looked the same in Phoenix. That is what the boys at home thought of me as they watched me slowly go through all the awkward stages of adolescence. It is because I was a novelty here, and there were few innovations. My crippling clumsiness was more endearing than pathetic, making me look like a damsel in distress. Whatever the reason, Buddy's puppy-dog behavior and J. A's clear rivalry with him were disconcerting. I was not sure I would rather be ignored.

Black ice covering the road seems to be no problem for my car. I did not want to make a path of destruction down Main Street, but I went very slowly. When I got out of the car at school, I saw why I had so little trouble. Something silver caught my eye and I walked to the back of the car to check the tires, cautiously supporting them from the side.



Around them were thin diamond-shaped chains. Charlie got up and put snow chains on my car, who knows? My voice suddenly became hoarse. I was not used to being taken care of, and Charlie's unspoken concern surprised me.

I was standing in the back corner of the car trying to fight the sudden wave of emotion from the snow chains when I heard a strange sound. It was a very loud shriek, quickly becoming painfully loud. I looked up in shock. I saw several things at once. Nothing moved in slow motion like in the movies. Instead, the adrenaline made my brain work faster and I was able to absorb several things in detail at once. Melvin Shezor was standing four cars away from me, staring at me menacingly. Frozen in the same mask of shock, his face stood out from the sea. But more importantly, the dark blue van skidded, wheels locked and brakes screeching wildly across the ice in the parking lot. I was standing between them as they tried to hit the back corner of my car. I did not even have time to close my eyes.

Just before I heard the cracking sound of the van folding around the bed, something hit me hard, but not in the direction I expected. My head cracked through the ice cap, and I felt something hard and cold push me to the ground. He was lying on the pavement behind the yellow

car parked next to him. But the minibus kept coming, so there was no chance of noticing anything else. It swung around the end of the car, skidding, and was about to crash into me again.

I felt someone with me as I uttered a soft oath, and I could not help but recognize the voice. Two long white arms came down protectively in front of me and the van shuddered to a halt near to my face, their large hands fitting perfectly into the deep recesses on the side of the van's body.

Then his hand moved so fast it blurred. One suddenly gripped the underbody of the van, and something dragged me, twisting my legs like a rag doll and hitting the wheels of the brown car. The screech of metal hurt my ears and the van landed on the asphalt with shattering glass - exactly where my feet had been a second ago.

There was silence for a second before the screaming started. Suddenly I heard more than one person yelling my name as I fell asleep. But Melvin Shezor's low, frenzied voice rang out louder than all the screams.

'Lilla? Are you okay?'

'I am okay.'

Then my voice sounded strange. I tried to get up and realized that he was holding me by the side of his body with metal bars.

'Be careful,' he warned as I struggled. 'You hit your head pretty hard.'

I experienced a throbbing pain centered above my left ear.

'Oh,' I said, surprised.

I thought so. Surprisingly, her voice sounded like she was stifling a laugh.

'How...' I straightened my head and ran, trying to control myself. 'How did you get here so fast?'

'I was standing right next to you, Lilla,' he said in a serious tone again.

- I sat back down, this time he allowed me to wrap his arms around my waist, releasing his arms and sliding as far from me as he could in the confined space. I lost my way again with the power of his golden eyes when I saw his worried and innocent face. What did I ask him?

Then we found them in tears, yelling at each other and yelling at us.

'Don't move,' someone instructed.

'Get Tyler out of the van!' someone else shouted.

There was a lot of activity around us. I tried to get up, but Melvin's cold hands lowered my shoulders.

'Just stay still for now.'

'But it's cold,' I complained. He laughed under his breath to my surprise. There was a sound edge.

'You were there,' I suddenly remembered, stopping his laughter. 'You were next to your car.'

His face hardened. 'No, I didn't.'

'I saw you.' There was chaos all around us. I could hear the loud voices of adults arriving on the stage. But I persisted in our argument; I was right, he was going to admit it.

'Lilla, I stood with you and pulled you out of the way.' He opened his eyes to me with full, devastating power, as if trying to say something important.

'No.' I set my jaw.

The gold in his eyes flashed. 'Please, Lilla.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Trust me,' he begged, his voice soft and choked.

I could hear the sirens now. 'Promise to explain everything to me later?'

'Okay,' he snapped, suddenly annoyed.

'Fine,' I repeated angrily.

It took six EMTs and two teachers - Mr. DeVolcano and Coach Clapp - to drop the van far enough away from us to get stretchers in. Melvin forcefully refused his and I tried to do the same, but the traitor told them he would hit my head and I had a concussion. I almost died of humiliation when they put the neck brace on. It seemed like the whole school was there, watching warily as I was loaded into the back of the ambulance. Melvin had to drive in front. He was crazy.

To make matters worse, Chief Black arrived before I could be safely removed.

'Lilla!' He screamed in panic as he recognized me on the stretcher.

'I'm fine, Char- dad,' he sighed. 'There's nothing wrong with me.'

He went to the nearest EMT for a second opinion. I tuned it to contemplate the jumble of inexplicable images chasing my mind. As I was pulled away from the car, I noticed a deep dent in the bumper of the car - a very distinct dent that matched the contours of Melvin's shoulders... as if he had pushed himself against the car with enough force to break the metal frame. to damage.

- And-

Then there was his family, who watched from a distance, with expressions ranging from disapproval to anger, but without any sign of concern for their brother's safety.

I tried to produce a logical solution that could explain what I had just seen - one that ruled out the assumption that I was crazy.

Naturally, the ambulance received a police escort to the provincial hospital. I felt ridiculous the whole time I was unloaded. To make matters worse, Melvin was walking through the hospital doors on his own. I grit my teeth.

I was taken to the emergency room, a long room with a row of beds separated by pastel-colored curtains. A nurse put a pressure cuff on my arm and a thermometer under my tongue. Since no one bothered to pull the curtain around to give me some privacy, I decided I was not forced to wear the sturdy neck brace anymore. When the nurse left, I quickly fastened him with Velcro and threw him under the bed.

There was another crowd of hospital staff, another stretcher was taken to the bed next to me. I recognized Tyler Crowley from my senior class under the bloody bandage wrapped tightly around his head. Tyler looked a hundred times worse than I felt. But he looked at me concerned.

'Lilla, I'm so sorry!'

'You're fine, Tyler - you look awful, are you okay?' As we spoke, the nurses began to loosen his dirty bandage, exposing a series of shallow cuts on his forehead and left cheek.

He ignored me. 'I thought I was going to kill you! I went too fast and accidentally hit the ice...' He ducked when a nurse started punching him in the face.

'Don't worry, I missed you.'

'How did you get out of the way so quickly? You were there and then you were gone...'

'Um... Melvin pulled me aside.'

He looked confused. 'WHO?'

'Melvin Shezor - he was standing next to me.' I have always been a terrible liar; I did not sound convincing at all.

'Shezor? I did not see him... wow, it all happened so fast, I guess. Is he okay?'

'I think so. He is here somewhere, but they did not let him be used on a stretcher.'

I knew I was not crazy. What happened? There was no way to explain what I had seen.

Then, I was driven off to have an X-ray of my head. I told them that there was nothing wrong and that I was right. Not even a shock. I asked if I could leave, but the nurse told me to talk to a doctor first. So, I was stuck in the emergency room, waiting, chased by Tyler's constant apologies and promises to make it right. Every time I tried to convince him I was okay, he kept torturing himself. Finally, I closed my eyes and ignored him. He continued with a remorseful murmur.



'Is she sleeping?' asked a musical voice. My eyes opened.

Melvin stood smiling at the foot of my bed. I stared at him. It was not easy - it would have been more natural to watch.

'Hey, Melvin, I'm so sorry,' Tyler began.

Melvin raised his hand to stop him.

'No blood, no dirt,' he said, blinking his brilliant teeth. He went to the edge of Tyler's bed, opposite me. He smiled again.

'So- o what's the verdict?' he asked me.

'There's nothing wrong with me, but they won't let me go,' he complained. 'How are you not tied to a stretcher like the rest of us?'

'It's about what you know,' he replied. 'But don't worry, I've come to accept you.'

Then a doctor walked around the corner and my jaw dropped. He was young, he was blond... and he was prettier than any movie star I had ever seen. However, he was pale and tired looking, with circles under his eyes. According to Charlie's description, this must have been Melvin's father.

'So, Miss Natalie-Black,' said Dr. Shezor in an extremely attractive voice, 'how do you feel?'

'I'm fine,' I said, one last time, I hoped.

He went to the window in the wall above my head and turned it on.

'X- rays look good,' he said. 'Does your head hurt? Melvin said you hit him too hard.'

'It's all right,' I repeated with a sigh and quickly walked over to Melvin.

The doctor's cold fingers brushed lightly against my skull. He noticed when I leaned over.

'Tender?' he asked.

'Not really.' I had worse.

I heard a chuckle and looked to the side to see Melvin's protective smile. My eyes narrowed.

'Well, your fathers in the drawing room- you can go home with him now. But come back if you get dizzy or cannot see at all.'

'Can't I go back to school?' I asked, imagining Charlie trying to be considerate.

'Maybe you should take it easy today.'

I looked at Melvin. 'Is he going to school?'

'Someone has to spread the good news that we survived,' Melvin said smugly.

'Indeed,' corrected Dr. Shezor, 'most of the school seems to be in the waiting room.'

'Oh no,' I moaned, covering my face with my hands.

Dr. Shezor raised his eyebrows. 'Do you want to stay?'

'No!' I got up, threw my legs over the edge of the bed, and quickly jumped down. Very quickly - I wobbled and Dr. Shezor caught me. He looked concerned.

'I'm fine,' I assured her again. No need to tell him my balance issues had nothing to do with the headshot.

'Have some Tylenol for the pain,' he suggested, staring at me.

'It doesn't hurt that much,' I insisted.

'Looks like you've been extremely lucky,' said Dr. Shezor, smiling as he drew my map with a wave.

'Lucky Melvin happened to be standing next to me,' I corrected, staring hard at the subject of my statement.

'Oh, well, yes,' agreed Dr. Shezor, suddenly busy with the papers in front of him. Then he looked at Tyler and went to the other bed. My intuition trembled; the doctor was in it.

'I'm afraid you'll have to stay with us a little longer,' he told Tyler and began checking his cuts.

As soon as the doctor turned his back, I went to Melvin.

'Can I have a word with you?' I hissed under his breath. He took a step away from me, jaws clenched.

'Your father is waiting for you,' he said through clenched teeth.

I glanced at Dr. Shezor and Tyler.

'I'd like to talk to you alone if you don't mind,' I insisted.

He looked furious, then turned and stomped across the long room. I almost had to run to keep up. As soon as we turned the corner into a short hallway, he turned and looked at me.

'What do you want?' he asked irritated. His eyes were cold.

His friendship scared me. My words came out less harshly than I intended. 'You owe me an explanation,' I reminded him.

'I saved your life - I don't owe you anything.'

I turned angrily to his voice. 'You promised it.'

'Lilla, you hit your head, I don't know what you're talking about.' His tone was sharp.

My anger flared now, and I looked at him defiantly. 'There's nothing wrong with my head.'

He looked back. 'What do you want from me, Lilla?'

'I want to know the truth,' I said. 'I want to know why I'm lying about you.'

'What do you think happened?' he broke.

He came out hastily.

'All I know is you were not around me - Tyler did not see you either, so do not tell me I hit my head too hard. That van would crush us both - and it did not, and your hands scratched its side - and you left a scratch on the other car, and you were not hurt at all - and the van should have broken my legs, but you hold you...' I could hear how crazy it sounded and I could not go on. I was so angry I felt the tears coming; I tried to force them back by gritting my teeth.

He looked at me incredulously, but his face was tense, defensive.

'Do you think I stole a van from you?' His tone questioned my sanity but only made me more suspicious. It was like a line delivered perfectly by an accomplished actor.

I just nodded once; my jaw clenched.

'Nobody's going to believe this, you know.' His voice now had an edge of mockery.

'I won't tell anyone.' I said each word slowly, controlling my anger carefully.

Surprise crossed his face. 'Then why does it matter?'

'It's important to me,' I insisted. 'I don't like to lie - so there better be a good reason why I'm doing it.'

'Can't you just thank me and get over it?'

'Thank you.' I waited, warmed, and waited.

'You're not letting him go, are you?'

'No.'

'In that case ... I hope you enjoy the disappointment.'

We stroked in silence. I was the first to speak, trying to keep myself focused. I threatened to be distracted by his wild and glorious face. It was like trying to see a destroying angel.

'Why did you bother?' I asked him frozen.

He paused and for a moment his breathtaking face suddenly became vulnerable.

'I don't know,' he whispered.

And then he turned his back on me and left.

I was so angry that it made me a few took minutes to move. When I could walk, I slowly made my way to the exit at the end of the hall

The lounge was more uncomfortable than I had feared. It felt like every face I knew in McAuley was there staring at me. Charlie ran to me; I raised my hands.

'There's nothing wrong with me,' I assured her sullenly. I was still heavy, not in the mood for conversation.

'What did the doctor say?'

'Dr. Shezor saw me and said I was fine and could go home.' he sighed. Buddy, Charity-Anna, and J.A were all there and started to join us. 'Let's go,' I asked.

Charlie put an arm behind my back, without even touching me, and led me to the glass doors of the exit I waved angrily to my friends, hoping to show them they need not worry anymore. It was a great relief - the first time I felt this way - to get on the cruiser. I drove in silence. I was so absorbed in my thoughts I hardly knew Charlie was there. I was sure Melvin's protective behavior in the hall was confirmation of the strange things I still did not could not believe I had seen them.

When we got home, Charlie finally spoke.

'Uh... you have to call Renée.' He hung his head, guilty.

I was terrified. 'You told mama!'



'Take me excuse me.'

I slammed the cruiser door a little harder than I should have on my way out outwards.

My mother was, of course, hysterical. I had to tell her I was fine at least thirty times before she calmed down. She begged me to come home - oblivious to the fact that the house was empty at the time - but her pleas were easier to resist than I had imagined. I was consumed by the mystery of Melvin. And more than a little obsessed with Melvin himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I did not want to escape McAuley as much as a normal, normal human would.

I decided I might as well go to bed early that night. Charlie kept looking at me in fear and it got on my nerves. I stopped on the way to get three Tylenol from the bathroom. They helped me and when the pain subsided, I fell asleep.

That was the first night I wanted Melvin Shezor.

## 5 Encouragement

In my dream it was very dark, and a dim light was coming from Melvin's skin. I could not see his face, only his back as he turned away from me and I was left black. No matter how fast I ran, I could not

catch up; No matter how many times I called him, he never turned away. I struggled, waking up in the middle of the night and unable to get back to sleep for what seemed like an exceptionally long time. After that he was in my dreams every night, but always on the edge, never out of reach.

A month after the accident, he was uncomfortable, tense, and initially awkward.

To my dismay, I found myself the center of attention for the rest of the week. Tyler Crowley was impossible, watching me and trying to fix me somehow. I tried to convince him to forget about everything I wanted more than anything else - especially since nothing had happened to me - but he was adamant. He followed me between classes and sat down at our now crowded lunch table. Buddy and J.A were less than friendly with him, which made me worry that I might gain another unwanted fan.

No one seemed to care about Melvin, even though I repeatedly claimed he was a hero - that he got out of my way and almost got crushed. I tried to convince him. Charity-Anna, Buddy, J.A, and others always commented that they did not see the van there until it was taken.

I wondered to myself why no one stood far away and saw him before he suddenly saved my life. Frustrated, I realized why - no one

always knew about Melvin as I did. No one else sees it the way I do. How sad.

Never had Melvin been surrounded by so many onlookers wanting to discover his story. People avoided him as usual. As always, the Shezor and Mercados were sitting at the same table, not eating, just talking. None of them, especially Melvin, looked at me.

Sitting next to me in the room, as far away from me as the table would allow, he seemed completely unaware of my presence. Now and then, when his fist rose suddenly- skin stretched white over bone- I thought he was not as uncaring as he looked.

I wish he had not taken me out of the way of Tyler's van - I could not come to any other conclusion.

I really wanted to talk to him and tried the day after the accident. The last time I saw him outside of the ER, we were both upset. I am still angry that they do not trust me much, even though I hold up my end of the bargain flawlessly. But no matter how much he did, he saved my life. And overnight, the heat of my anger melted into overwhelming gratitude.

When I got to biology, he sat and stared straight ahead. I sat down and waited for her to turn to me. He gave no sign that he knew I was there.

'Hi, Melvin,' I said happily, showing him, I was about to make myself.

Without meeting my eyes, he turned his head a fraction towards me, nodded once, and then looked away.

And that was the last contact I had with him, even though he was there, a foot away from me, every day. Sometimes I cannot stop myself - I look at him from afar, but in a cafe or a parking lot. I watched his golden eyes darken day by day. But I did not let him know it existed, any more than he showed me in class. I was there and the nightmares continued.

Despite my outright lies, my emails alerted the tenant to Ren and my anxiety, and she called several times in concern. I tried to convince myself that I was only sorry for the weather.

Buddy was at least amused by the seeming coolness between me and my lab partner. I could see he was worried that Melvin's brave rescue might surprise me, and he was relieved that it had the opposite

effect. He became more confident when he sat on the edge of my desk to talk before biology class and completely ignored Melvin when he ignored us.

The snow has washed away after a dangerously snowy day. Buddy is upset that he never got to attend the snowball but is excited that a trip to the beach will soon be possible. The rain continued heavily, and the weeks went by.

Charity-Anna alerted me to another event looming on the horizon - she would call Buddy in two weeks to ask his permission to invite him to the girls' spring prom on the first Tuesday in March.

'You sure it's okay... you didn't want to ask him?' She continued when I told her that at least she would not compromise.

'No, Anny, I'm not going,' I told her. Dancing was beautiful beyond my range of abilities.

'It's going to be a lot of fun.' Her attempts to convince me were half-hearted. I suspected Charity-Anna liked my popularity more than my company.

'You're going to have fun with Buddy,' I encouraged.

I was surprised the other day that Charity-Anna was not her usual expressive self in trig and Spanish. She was silent when she walked past me in the middle of class, and I was afraid to ask her why. If Buddy rejected her, I was the last person she wanted to tell.

My fears deepened as Charity-Anna talked to J.A as far away from Buddy as possible. Buddy was unusually quiet.

Buddy was still silent as he led me into the room, the discomfort on his face a bad sign. But I do not talk about it until I am in my place, and it is on my desk. As always, I was electrically aware that Melvin was sitting just a touch away, as if he were just a figment of my imagination.

'So,' Buddy said, looking at the floor, 'Charity-Anna asked me to the spring dance.'

'So nice.' I made my voice clear and excited. 'You're going to have a lot of fun with Charity-Anna.'

'Well...' He was not happy with my reaction as he studied my smile. 'I told her I had to think about it.'

'Why are you doing this?' Although I was relieved, I never gave it to her.

His face was bright red as he looked down again. My resolve was shaken by regret.

'Well... I was just wondering if you would consider asking me out.

I paused, hating the wave of guilt that washed over me. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw Melvin's head tilt reflexively in my direction.

'Buddy, I think you should say yes,' I said.

'Have you invited anyone yet?' Did Melvin notice Buddy's eyes flicker in his direction?

'No,' I said. 'I never go to the dance.'

'Why not?' Buddy asked.

I did not want to run into the safety risks that come with dancing, so I quickly produced a new plan.

'I'm going to Altoona that Saturday,' I explained. I had to get out of town anyway - suddenly it was the right time to go.

'Can't you go next weekend?'

'No, sorry,' I said. 'So, you do not have to keep Jace waiting anymore - it is rude.

'Yeah, you're right,' he muttered, turning to return to his seat, frustrated. I closed my eyes and pressed my fingers to my temples trying to get the guilt and sadness out of my head. Mr. Trudeau began to speak. I sighed and opened my eyes.

- And-

Then Melvin looked at me curiously, the same, familiar edge of frustration now clearer in his black eyes.

I looked back in surprise, expecting him to quickly look away. But instead, he continued to stare into my eyes with intense intensity. When I looked away, there was no doubt. My hands started shaking.

'Mr. Shezor?' The teacher was calling, looking for an answer to a question I did not hear.

'Murphy's Law Cycle,' Melvin replied as he turned to Mr. Trudeau.

I looked down at my book as soon as his eyes left me and tried to find my place. As cowardly as before, I changed my hair over my right shoulder to hide my face. I could not believe the rush of emotion that went



through me - because it was the first time, he had seen me in half a dozen weeks. I could not let this phase affect me. It was sad. More than sad, it was unhealthy.

For the rest of the hour, I tried extremely hard not to recognize him, and since that was impossible, at least not to let him know that I knew him. When Lily finally rang, I turned my back to him to collect my things, expecting him to leave at once as usual.

'Lilla?' His voice should not have been so familiar to me, because I had known his voice not just for a few weeks, but for my whole life.

He frowned at his perfect face. His eyes were light again today, a deep golden-hazel color. Then I had to look down, regrouping my now tangled thoughts.

'Why was the traffic jam last night?' I asked, and I am still looking away. 'I thought you were supposed to pretend I didn't exist, and not bother me to death.'

'It was for Tyler, not me. I had to give him his chance.'

Laughter.

'You...' she gasped. I could not think of a bad enough word. I felt like the heat of my anger should burn him physically, but he seemed more amused.

- And-

I am not pretending you do not exist,' he continued.

'So, you are trying to annoy me to death? Since Tyler's car did not do the job?'

Anger flashed in his brown eyes. His lips pressed into a hard line, and all signs of humor disappeared.

'Lilla, you are absolutely ridiculous,' he said in a cold deep voice.

My palms were numb - I desperately wanted to hit something. I was surprised. I was usually a non-violent person. I turned my back and started walking away.

He said, 'Wait.' I kept walking, angrily walking in the rain. But he was by my side, getting along easily.

'I'm sorry, that was rude,' he said as we walked. I ignored him. He continued, 'I'm not saying it's not true, but it was rude to say it, anyway.'

'Why don't you leave me alone?' grumbled.

'I wanted to ask you something,' he said with a laugh, 'but you drove me away.' He seems to have regained his sense of humor.

'Do you have multiple personality disorder?' I asked hard.

'You do it again.'

I sighed. 'Okay then. What do you want to ask?'

'I was wondering if, a week after Saturday- - you know, Spring Dance Day- '

Are you trying to be funny? I interrupted him as I turned toward him. My face flushed as I looked at his expression.

His eyes were wickedly amused. 'Please let me finish?' I bit my lip and clasped my hands together, interlaced my fingers, so I could not make out any rashes. 'I heard you say you are going to Altoona that day, and I was wondering if you wanted a ride.'

That was unexpected.

'What or what?' I was not sure what he meant.

'Would you like a ride to Altoona?'

'Who with?' I asked confused.' 'I'm obvious.' He uttered every syllable as if he were talking to a mentally disabled person.

I am still dumbfounded.

'Why?'

'Well, I was planning to go to Altoona in the next few weeks, and to be honest, I'm not sure what If your car can do that.' 'My car is running fine, thanks so much for your concern.' I started walking again but was incredibly surprised to keep the same level of anger.' 'But can your car get there with one gas tank?' Match my pace again.' 'I don't see how this is any of your business.' Stupid, brilliant Volvo owner.

'Wasting limited resources is everyone's business.' 'Honestly, Melvin.' I was thrilled when I said his name, and I hated him. 'No. I can keep up with you. I thought you did not want to be my friend.'

'I said it would be better if we weren't friends, not because I don't want to be.'

'Oh, thanks, that's all cleared up now.' Very ironic. I realized I stopped walking once 'Other. We were now under the canopy of the cafeteria roof, so I could look him in the face more easily. Which certainly did not help my clarity of thought. It would be more... it would be wiser not to be my friend.' 'But I'm tired of trying to get away from you, Lilla,' his eyes were wonderfully thick when he said that last sentence, his voice rising. I do not remember how to breathe.

'Are you going to go with me to Altoona?' he then asked, still intense.

I could not speak at all, so I just nodded.

He smiled briefly, then His face turned serious.

'You really have to get away from me,' he warned. 'I'll see you in class.'

He turned suddenly and walked back to the way we came.

## 6 Bloodshed

I made my way to English in a daze. I did not even realize when I had already entered this class.

'Thank you for joining us, Miss Natalie-Black,' Mr. Stackawitz said insultingly.

I blushed and rushed to my seat.

It was not until the end of class that I realized that Buddy was not sitting in his usual place next to me. I felt a pang of guilt. But he met me and J.A at the door as usual, so I figured I was not completely unforgivable. Buddy seemed to enjoy himself as we walked, and he got excited when he mentioned this weekend's weather report. The rain was supposed to take a slight break, so maybe its trip to the shore is possible. I tried to look excited to make up for his disappointment yesterday. It was hard; Rain or no rain, we would still be in our forties, if we were lucky.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. It was hard to believe that I could not just imagine what Melvin had said, and the way his eyes looked. It was just a very convincing dream that I was confusing with reality. It seemed more likely than what I was appealing to on any level.

So- o, I grew impatient and scared when Charity-Anna and I walked into the cafeteria. I wanted to see his face, to see if he was back to the cold, indifferent person I had known for several weeks. Or if, by some miracle, you heard what I thought I heard this morning. Charity-Anna

repeatedly teased her dance plans - Emily and Jeannette asked the other boys and they all went together - completely oblivious to my inattention.

I was overcome with disappointment as my eyes fixed incorrectly on his table. The other four were there, but he was absent. Has he returned home? Charity-Anna, still babbling, followed the line, shattering. I lost my appetite - only bought a bottle of lemonade. I just wanted to go sit and sulk.

'Melvin Shezor is watching you again,' Charity-Anna said, finally penetrating my resume with her name. 'I wonder why he's sitting alone today.'

My head exploded. I continued her gaze to see Melvin, smirking, staring at me from an empty table on the other side of the cafeteria where he usually sat. As soon as he caught my eye, he raised his hand and pointed his index finger at me to join him. When I looked at him in disbelief, he winked.

'Is he talking about you?' Charity-Anna asked, with humiliating astonishment in her voice.

'Maybe he needs help with his biology homework,' she muttered to him. 'Mn, I better go see what he wants.'

I felt like she was staring at me as I walked away.

When I got to his table, I stood behind the chair across from him, undecided.

'Why- don't you sit with me today?' he asked with a smile.

I sat down mechanically, watching him cautiously. He was still smiling. It was hard to believe that someone so beautiful could be real. I was afraid he would disappear in a sudden puff of smoke and wake up.

He was waiting for me to say something.

'It's different,' she finally succeeded.

'Okay...' He paused, then the rest of the words followed hastily. 'I decided that as long as I was going to hell, I might as well do it too.'

I waited for him to say something logical. The seconds passed.

'You know I have no idea what you mean,' I pointed out at the end.

'I say.' He smiled again, then changed the subject. 'Your friends are mad at me for robbing you.'



'They will survive.' I could feel their dull stares behind my back.

'I may not bring you back,' he said, with an evil look in his eyes.

Then I like- swallowed.

He is laughing. 'You look worried.'

'No,' I said, but my voice cracked stupidly. 'Surprised, actually...what's the point of all this?'

'I told you; I am sick of trying to get away from you. So, I gave up. He was still smiling, but his seductive eyes were serious.

'To sell...? I was repeatedly confused.

'Yes - give up trying to be good. I will do what I want now and drop the chips where I can.' His smile faded as he explained, and a harsh edge crept into his voice.

'You lost me again.'

The twisted, jaw-dropping smile reappeared.

'I always say a lot of things when I talk to you - that's one of the problems.'

'Don't worry - I don't get it,' I said sarcastically.

'I count on it.'

'So, in plain English, are we friends now?'

'Friends...' he mused doubtfully.

'Or not,' she muttered.

He smiles. 'Well, we can try, I guess. But I am warning you now that I am not a good friend of yours.' Behind his smile, the warning was real.

'You say that often,' I pointed at him, trying to ignore the sudden tremor in my stomach and keep my voice steady.

'Yes, because you do not listen to me. I am still waiting for you to believe. If you are smart, you will avoid me.'

'I think you have also clearly expressed your opinion on a mental subject.' My eyes narrowed.

He smiled apologetically.

'So, as long as I...am not smart, we'll try to be friends?' I struggled to sum up the confusing exchange.

'It's the sound of truth.'

I looked at my hand wrapped around a bottle of lemonade, not knowing what to do now.

'What are you thinking about?' asked curiously.

Looking into his deep golden eyes, she was confused and, as usual, told the truth.

'I'm trying to understand what you're doing.'

He clenched his jaw but kept his smile in place with some effort.

'Are you lucky with that?' He asked offhand.

'Not much,' she admitted.

I laughed it off. 'What are your theories?'

I was ashamed. I have been hesitating for a month between Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker. It was out of the question for me to admit it.

'Won't you tell me?' he asked, tilting his head to the side with a surprisingly seductive smile.

I shook my head. 'Very embarrassing'.

'It's really frustrating, you know,' he complained.

'No,' I quickly refused, eyes narrowed, 'I cannot imagine why it would be so frustrating, just because someone refuses to tell you what they are thinking, even if they are putting on makeup all the time. a little. ambiguity, the notes are specifically designed to keep you awake wondering what they might mean... Now, why is that so frustrating?

He grimaced...

'Or better,' she continued, 'that pent- up annoyance is now flowing freely,' I would say that person has also done a wide range of weird things - from saving your life in impossible circumstances one day to treating you like an outcast the next day, and he never explained anything, even after promising. It would also be incredibly quiet.

'You're in a bit of a mood, aren't you?'

'I don't like double standards.'

We stared at each other, not smiling.

He looked over my shoulder, then laughed unexpectedly.

'What or what?'

'I'm rude to you - he wonders whether or not he should interrupt our argument.'

'I am not wrong. I told you; most people are easy to read.'

'Except me, of course.'

'Yes, except you.' His mood suddenly changed. His eyes turned to sadness. 'I wonder why.'

'To pull away from the sternness in his gaze. I concentrated on unscrewing my lemonade cap. She took a big sip, staring at the table without seeing her.'

You are not hungry? Asked Distracted.

'Wanted to point out that my stomach was already full of butterflies.' 'You, are they? I looked at the empty table in front of him.'

'No, I am not hungry. I did not understand his expression - he sounded

'Can you do me a favor?' I asked after a second of hesitation.

He suddenly became suspicious. 'It depends on what you want.'

'Not much.'

Wait, careful but curious.

'I was just wondering...if you could let me know in advance the next time you decide to ignore me for my own good. Just so I am ready.' I looked at the lemonade bottle as I spoke, tracing the circle of the hole with my little finger.

'That seems fair.' He pursed his lips to keep from laughing when I looked up.

'Thanks.'

'So can I get an answer back?' Student.

'One...'

Tell me a theory.

Excuse me. 'Not this one.'

'You weren't eligible, I just promised an answer,' he told me.

I reminded him again, 'You broke your promises. Just a theory - I will not laugh.'

'Yes, you will.' I was sure.

He looked down, then looked at me through his long dark lashes, his arrogant eyes burning.

'Excuse me?' Breathe, lean on me.

I blinked; my mind went blank. Holy crow, how did he do that?

'What?' I asked in a daze.

'If he please just tells me a little theory.' His eyes still burn on my face.

'Well, was she bitten by a radioactive spider?' Was he also hypnotized? Or was I just a job hopelessly easy?

'That's not very creative,' he sneered.

'I'm sorry, that's all I have,' I said, annoyed.

'You're not even close.' he joked.

'No spiders?'

'No.'

'And there's no radioactivity?'

'She sighed, 'Shit.'

'I don't mind kryptonite either.', he said laughing. You are not supposed to laugh, remember?'

I struggle to put on makeup.

I warned him, 'I'll find out eventually.'

'I hope you don't try.' He was serious again.

'Because...?'

'What if I am not a superhero? What if I am the bad guy?' He smiled impishly, but his eyes were impervious too.

'His face suddenly stiffened, as if he had been afraid that he had said so many things by chance.

'Are you dangerous?' to tell me that all the time.

He just stared at me; his eyes filled with an emotion I could not understand.

'But not bad,' I whisper, shaking my head. 'No, I don't think you'

You are wrong.' His voice was almost inaudible. He looked down, stole the cork from my bottle, then turned it on its side between his fingers. I looked at him wondering why I was not scared. he said - it was



obvious. But I was anxious, nervous... and more than anything else, I was intrigued. The same thing I always felt when I was near him.

The silence continued until I noticed that the cafeteria was empty.

I jumped to my feet. 'We will be late.'

'Ongoing to class today,' he said, spinning the hood so fast it was a blur.

'Why not?'

'It's healthy to skip class once in a while.' He smiled at me, but his eyes were still cloudy.

I said to him- 'Okay, I'm going'. I was too big a coward to risk getting caught.

He turned his attention back to his temporary climax. 'I'll see you later, then.'

I hesitated, torn, but the first ring sent me rushing for the door - with one last look confirming that he had not moved an inch.

When I was running in class, my head was spinning faster than the bottle cap. So, few questions were answered compared to the number of news asked. At least the rain has stopped.

I was lucky; Mr. Trudeau was not in the room yet when I arrived. I quickly settled into my seat, realizing Buddy and Jeannette were both looking at me. Buddy looked upset. Jeannette looked a little startled and amazed.

Mr. Trudeau then entered the room, calling the class to ask. He fiddled with some small boxes in his arms. He put them on Buddy's table and asked him to start passing them around the class.

'Okay, guys, I want you all to take a piece of each box,' he said, pulling out a pair of rubber gloves from a lab coat pocket and pulling it out. The high-pitched sound of gloves snapping into place on her wrists sounded disturbing to me. 'The first should be a card,' he continued, holding up a white card with four distinct squares on it and showing it. The second is a four-pointed rod - 'grab something that looks like an almost toothless hair' - and the third is a sterile micro scalpel. He lifted a small piece of blue plastic and opened it. The spike was not visible from this distance, but my stomach turned.

'I'll bring a dropper to prepare your cards, so please don't start until I join you.' He started again at Buddy's table, placing a drop of water in each of the four squares. 'So, I want you to poke your finger with the clip...' He grabbed Buddy's hand and stabbed the tip at the end of Buddy's middle finger. Oh no. Dewy wetness burst on my forehead.

'Put a small drop of blood on each of the teeth. Squeeze Buddy's finger until the blood comes out. I swallowed jerkily, my stomach groaning.

'So, apply it to the card,' he said. He finished, holding the filed red card so we could see it. I closed my eyes, trying to hear through my ringing ears...

'The Red Cross is going to hold a blood drive in Big Sur next weekend, so I thought you all should know your blood type. 'He seemed immensely proud of himself. 'Those of you who haven't turned eighteen will need your parents' permission - I have some slips on my desk.'

He continued in the room with water drops. I placed my cheek on the soft black table and consciously tried to hold on. I could hear screams, complaints, and laughter all around me as my classmates wiggled their fingers. I interceded and execrated slowly through my mouth.

'Lilla, are you okay?' Mr. Trudeau asked. His voice was close to my head and sounded alarmed.

'I know my blood type, Mr. Trudeau,' I said weakly. I was afraid to lift my head.

'Are you feeling weak?'

'Yes, sir,' I muttered, kicking myself inwardly for not giving up when I had the chance.

'Can someone take Lilla to the nurse, please?' He called.

I did not have to look up to know it was Buddy who had volunteered.

'Can you walk?' asked Mr. Trudeau.

'Yes,' she whispered. Let me out of here, I guess. I will crawl.

Buddy looked excited as he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled my arm over his shoulder. I leaned on him firmly as I walked out of the classroom.

Buddy gently pulled me across campus. As we stood at the edge of the cafeteria, out of sight of the Fourth Building in case Mr. Trudeau was watching, I stopped.

'Just let me sit down for a minute, please?' I begged.

Help me to sit on the edge of the aisle.

'And whatever you do, put your hand in your pocket,' she warned. I was still dazed. I leaned back to the side, rested my cheek against the wet, icy cement of the sidewalk, and closed my eyes. It helps a bit.

'Wow, you're green, Lilla,' Buddy said nervously.

'Beautiful'? A different voice was calling from afar.

Number! And let me imagine that awful familiar voice.

'What's wrong - did she hurt herself?' His voice was closer now, and he sounded annoyed. I did not imagine it. I closed my eyes hoping to die. Or at least no vomiting.

Buddy looked nervous. 'She passed out. I do not know what happened, she did not even stick her finger out.'

'Beautiful'. Melvin's voice next to me was relaxed now. 'Can you hear me?'

She sighed, 'No.' 'adrift.'

I laughed it off.

'I'd take her to the nurse, but she wouldn't go any further,'  
Buddy explained defensively.

'I'll take it,' Melvin said. I could still hear the smile in his  
voice. 'You can go back to class.'

Buddy protested, 'No.' 'I'm supposed to do this.'

Suddenly, the pavement disappeared under me. My eyes  
widened in shock. Melvin carried me in his arms so easily as if I weighed  
ten pounds instead of a hundred and ten.

'Put me down!' Please let me not vomit it. He was walking  
before I finished.

'Hey!' Buddy called, already ten paces behind us.

Melvin ignored her. 'You look terrible,' he told me, smiling.

'Take me back to the pier,' he moaned. The swinging motion  
of his career has not been helpful. He pulled me away from his body, very  
carefully, supporting all my weight with his arms only - he did not seem to  
mind.

'So, you fainted at the sight of blood?' Asked. This amused  
him.

I did not answer. I closed my eyes again and fought nausea with all my might, my lips tight.

'Not even your blood,' he said amused.

I do not know how he opened the door while carrying me, but it was suddenly warm, so I knew we were inside.

'Oh my god,' I heard a panting female voice.

'She passed out in biology,' Melvin explained.

I opened my eyes. I was in the office and Melvin was jumping from the reception to the nurse's door. Mrs. Stackawitz, the red-haired receptionist, ran ahead of him to keep it open. The nursing grandmother looked up from the novel in amazement as Melvin ushered me into the bedroom and gently laid me down on the cracked sheet that covered the brown vinyl mattress of one of the beds. Then, move to stand facing the wall as far into the narrow room as possible. His eyes were bright and excited.

'She just fainted a little,' he reassured the stunned nurse. 'They are the blood type in biology.'

The nurse nodded sagely. 'There is always one.'

I stifled a laugh.

'Just lay down for a minute, baby, it'll pass.'

'I know,' she sighed. The nausea was already fading.

'Does this happen often?' She asked.

'Sometimes,' she admitted. Melvin coughed to hide another laugh.

'You can go back to class now,' she told him.

'I'm supposed to stay with her.' He said this with such emphatic authority - although she pursed her lips - that the nurse did not discuss the matter further.

'I'll get you some ice cream for your forehead, honey,' she told me, then walked out of the room.

'I was right,' I complained and closed my eyes.

'Usually - but about what exactly this time?'

Giving up something healthy. I practiced breathing regularly.



'You scared me for a minute there,' he confessed after a pause. His tone sounded like he was admitting humiliating weakness. 'I thought Newton was dragging your body to bury it in the woods.'

'Ha.' I still closed my eyes but felt more natural every minute.

'Honestly, I have seen better-colored corpses. I was afraid that I had to avenge your murder.

'Poor Buddy. I bet he is crazy.'

'He absolutely hates me,' Melvin said happily.

'You can't tell,' I said, but suddenly wondered if he could.

'I saw his face - I can tell.'

'How did you see me? I thought you were giving up. I am fine now, although nausea would pass faster if I had something for breakfast. On the other hand, I may have been lucky enough to have an empty stomach.

'I was in my car, listening to a CD.' Such a natural response - it surprised me.

I heard the door and opened my eyes to see the nurse putting a cold compress in her hand.

'Here, my darling.' I put it on my forehead. 'You look better,' she added.

'I think it's okay,' I said as I sat down. Just a little ringing in my ears, no spinning. The mint green walls stayed where they should be.

I could see that she was about to let me down, but then the door opened, and Mrs. Stackawitz poked her head inside...

'We have another one,' she warned.

I jumped up to free the crib for the next patient.

Prepare the compress for the nurse. 'Here, you do not need this.

Then Buddy staggered through the door, now supporting pale-looking Lee Stevens, another boy in our biology class. Melvin and I backed up to the wall to give them space.

'Oh no,' Melvin mumbled. 'Go to the office, Lilla.'

I looked at him in confusion.

'Trust me - go for it.'

I turned and grabbed the door before it closed and walked out of the infirmary. I could feel Melvin behind me.

'You really listened to me.' I was stunned.

'I smelled blood,' I said, wrinkling my nose. I have never been tired of looking at others like me.

Contradiction- 'People can't smell blood.'

'Well, I can...that is what makes me sick. It smells of rust...and salt.'

He stared at me with an inscrutable expression.

'What or what?' I asked.

'It's nothing.'

Buddy walked through the door and looked at me at Melvin. The look he gave Melvin confirmed what Melvin had said about hate. He looked at me, his eyes shining.

'You look better,' he charged.

I warned him again, 'Just put your hand in your pocket.

'It's not bleeding anymore,' he muttered. 'Are you going back to class?

'You're kidding? I just must turn around and go again.

'Yeah, I guess... So, you are going this weekend? To the beach?' As he spoke, he shot another look at Melvin, who stood before the crowded table, motionless as a statue, staring off into space.

I tried to be as friendly as possible. 'Of course, I said I existed.'

'We meet at my father's store at ten o'clock. Her eyes fell on Melvin again, wondering if he was giving away too much information. His body language made it clear that this was not an open invitation.

I promised, 'I'll be there.'

'I'll see you at the gym,' he said, anxiously heading for the door.

I replied 'Goodbye.' He looked at me again, his round face frowning slightly, then as he slowly walked through the door, his shoulders slumped. A wave of sympathy washed over me. I thought I saw his frustrated face again... at the gym.

'Gym' sighed.

'I can take care of it.' I did not notice Melvin moving beside me, but now he was talking in my ear. He muttered, 'Go sit down and look pale.'

It was not a challenge. I was still pale, and my last faint had left a faint streak of sweat on my face. I sat down in one of the folding chairs, creaking and leaning my head against the wall, my eyes closed. Fainting always bothered me.

I heard Melvin speaking quietly at the table.

'Mrs. Ashmore?'

'Yes?' I did not hear her return to her office

'Lilla has a gym for the next hour, and I do not think she is in good enough shape.

I was thinking of taking her home now. Do you think you can excuse her from class?' His voice was like melting honey. I can imagine how dark his eyes would be.

'Do you need to be excused too, Melvin?' Mrs. Ashmore fluttered. Why can't I do that?

'No, I have Mrs. Zimmer, you wouldn't mind.'

She called me, 'Okay, everything has been taken care of. You feel better, Lilla.' I nodded weakly and knocked her slightly.

'Can you walk, or do you want me to hold you again?' Turning his back to the receptionist, his expression became mocking.

'I'll walk.'

I stood up cautiously, and I was still fine. He held the door for me, his smile polite and his eyes scoffing. I walked out into the soft cold mist that was just beginning to fall. I felt so sweet - the first time I enjoyed the continuous moisture dripping from the sky - that I washed my face clean of sticky sweat.

I told him as he followed me- 'Thank you.' 'It almost pays to get sick to miss the gym.'

'At what time.' He was staring straight ahead, staring at the rain.

'So, are you going? This Saturday, I mean?' I wish he would, although that seemed unlikely. I could not film him loading into carpools with the rest of the kids from school; He did not belong to the same world. But just hoping it might have given me the first tingle of enthusiasm I felt for a walk.

'Where are you all going, exactly?' He was still looking forward, expressionless.

'All the way to La Bouche, to the first beach.' I studied his face, trying to read it. His eyes seemed to narrow infinitely.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, smiling sarcastically. 'I don't really think I was invited.'

I sighed. 'I just invited you.'

'Let you and I not push poor Buddy any more this week. We do not want him to attack.' His eyes danced. He was enjoying the idea too much.

Buddy Schmeck. She muttered, busy with the way he said 'You and I' I loved him more than I should.

We were near the parking lot now. I swerved and left towards my car. Something grabbed my jacket and set me back.

'Where do you think you're going?' he asked angrily. He was holding in one hand a handful of my jacket.

I was confused. 'I'm going home.'

'Didn't you hear my promise to take you home safely? Do you think I will let you drive on your condition?' His voice was still angry.

'What condition? What about my car?' I complained.

'I'll have Naddalin Natalie leave him after school.' He was pulling me toward his car now, pulling me out of my jacket. It was all I could do to prevent falling backward. He would pull me over anyway if I did.

'Then leave it!' I insisted. He ignored me. I staggered along either side of the wet pavement until we got to the Volvo. Then he finally freed me - I stumbled into the passenger door.

'You are so pushy!' Grumbled.

'It's open,' he replied. Get down on the driver's side.

'I am perfectly capable of driving myself home!' I stood next to the car, smoking. It was raining heavily now, and I had never lifted my headgear, so my hair was falling out on my back.

He lowered the motorized window and leaned across the seat towards me. 'Come in, Lilla.'

I did not answer. I was mentally calculating my chances of getting to the car before he could catch me. I had to admit they were not particularly good.

- And-



Then he threatened him, guessing my plan, 'I will pull you back.'

I tried to keep my dignity when I got in his car. I was not phenomenally successful - I looked like a half- soaked cat with my shoes squeaking.

'It's absolutely unnecessary,' I said stiffly.

did not answer. He fiddled with the controls, raised the heater, and turned off the music. As he was pulling out of the parking lot, I was preparing to give him the silent treatment- my face in a full frown- but then I got to know the music playing, and my curiosity improved my intentions.

Claire de Lune? I asked, surprised.

'Do you know Debussy?' He also seemed surprised.

'Not well,' she admitted. 'My mom plays a lot of classical music around the house - I only know my favorite.'

'It's one of my favorite things, too.' He stared at the rain, lost in thought.

I listened to the music relaxing on the light gray leather seat. It was impossible not to respond to the familiar and relaxed melody. The rain obliterated everything outside the window, turning into gray and green smudges. I began to realize that we were going too fast; The car was moving steadily, evenly, although I did not feel the speed. Only the town in which he flashed gave it.

'What is your mother like?' He asked me suddenly.

I peeked to see him studying me with curious eyes.

I told her, 'She looks a lot like me, but prettier.' raising his eyebrows. 'I have a lot of Charlie inside of me. She is more outgoing than me, and more courageous. She is irresponsible and a little weird, and she is an unpredictable chef. She is my best friend.' I have stopped. Talking about her was making me depressed.

'How old are you, Lilla?' His voice sounded frustrated for some reason I could not imagine. He parked the car, and I realized we were already at Charlie's house. The rain was so heavy that I could barely see the house at all. It was as if the car was submerged under the river.

I answered him, confused- 'I am sixteen.'

'You don't look like you're seventeen.'

His tone was painful. It made me laugh.

'What or what?' Then he asked, curious again.

'My mom always says that I was born 34 and that I'm middle-aged more every year.' I laughed then sighed. 'Well, someone must be an adult.' I stopped for a moment. I pointed out, 'You don't look like a junior high school student.' And having John Jackson pulling my pigtails all day long.'

He made a face and changed the subject.

'Why did your mother marry an elephant?'

I was surprised he would remember the name. I only mentioned it once, about two months ago. It took me a minute to respond.

'Mom...she is too young for her age. Deann makes her feel younger. Anyway, she is crazy about him.' I shook my head. The attraction was a mystery to me.

'Um do you agree?' Asked.

'Does it matter?' responded. 'I want her to be happy... which is who she wants.'

'That's very generous... I wonder,' he pondered.

'What or what?'

'Would you give the same courtesy to you, do you think? No matter who your choice was?' He was suddenly intending, his eyes looking at me.

'I think so,' she muttered. 'But she is the mother. It is a little different.'

'No one is so scary,' he quipped.

She smiled broadly in response. 'What do you mean by scary? Multiple facial piercings and blanket tattoos?'

'That's one definition, I think.'

'What is your definition?'

But he ignored my question and asked me another. 'Do you think I might be scared?' He raised one eyebrow, his faint smile lit up.

I thought for a moment wondering if the truth or the lie would end better. I decided to go with the truth. 'Hmmm... I think you could be if you wanted to.'

'Are you afraid of me now?' The smile disappeared and his celestial face suddenly became serious.

'The number.' But I answered very quickly. The smile is back.

'So, are you going to tell me about your family?' She asked to distract him. 'It should be a more interesting story than mine.'

He was at once careful. 'What do you want to know?'

Collins adopted you? I checked.

'Yes.'

I hesitated for a moment. 'What happened to your parents?'

They died many years ago. His tone was real.

She muttered, 'I'm sorry.'

'I do not remember them clearly. It has been Melchor and my dad's name for a long time now.'

'And you love them.' It was not a question. It was clear in the way he spoke about them.

'Yes.' Smile. 'I couldn't imagine two better people.'

'You are so lucky.'

'I know I am.'

'And your siblings?'

He looked at the clock on the dashboard.

'My brother, sister, Jae and Vivian for that matter, they would be very upset if they had to stand in the rain waiting for me.'

'Oh, sorry, I think you should go.' I did not want to get out of the car.

'And maybe you want your car back before Chief Black gets home, so you don't have to tell him about the biology incident.' smile at me.

'I am sure he has already heard. There are no secrets in forex.' I sighed.

He laughed and there was no end to his laughter.

'Enjoy your time at the beach... good weather for sunbathing.' Look at the rain cover.

'Will I see you tomorrow?'

'No, Dejen and I start the weekend early.'

'What are you going to do?' A friend could ask that, right? I was hoping the disappointment was not so clear in my voice.

'We'll be hiking in Goat Rocks Wilderness, just south of Rainier.'

~\*~

I remember Charlie said that Collins went camping often.

'Oh, well, have fun.' I tried to seem excited. I do not think I cheated him. A smile played on the edges of his lips.

'Are you going to do something for me this weekend?' He turned around to look me straight at me, taking advantage of the full power of his glowing golden eyes.

I nodded helplessly.

'Don't be offended, but you seem to be one of those people who attract accidents like a magnet. So- o, try not to fall into the ocean or get run over or anything, okay?' Crooked smile.

The helplessness faded as he spoke. I stared at it.

'I'll see what I can do,' I picked myself up as I jumped into the rain. I closed the door behind me with excessive force.

He was still smiling as he drove away from me.

## 7 Camp Firer

tried to focus on the third act of Macbeth, I listened to my car. I thought, driving in the rain, I could hear the roar of the engine. But when I went to look at the curtain - again - it was suddenly there.

I did not expect Friday, and this is more than I expected. Of course, there were lame comments. Charity-Anna seems especially blessed by this story. Fortunately, Buddy kept his mouth shut and no one seemed to know about Melvin's involvement. She had many questions about lunch.

'So, what did Melvin Shezor want yesterday?' Charity-Anna asked Trigg.

'I don't know,' I answered honestly. 'He didn't really get to the point.'

'You were crazy,' she fished.

'Am I?' I picked up my speech.

'You know, I have never seen him sit with anyone but his family. It is weird.'



'Weird,' I agreed. She looked angry; she rubbed her dark curls patiently- I assumed she was hoping to hear something that would make a relevant story to tell.

The worst thing about Friday was that even though I knew he would not be there, I still hoped. When I walked into the cafeteria with Charity-Anna and Buddy, I could not help but look at the table where Vivian, Naddalin Natalie, and Jae were sitting. And when I saw it again, I realized that I did not know how long to wait, so I could not stop the darkness weighing on me.

At my usual table, everyone was busy with our plans for the next day. Buddy, again he was animated and had great faith in the local weather which promised him sunshine tomorrow. I had to see it before I believed it. But it was hot today - about sixty. The departure was not so tragic.

During lunch, I got a few unfriendly looks from Emily, which I did not realize until we all left the room together. I stood behind her, just a foot from her straight, silver- blonde hair, and she did not know.

'...Lilla, you don't know why' - she teased my name - 'He doesn't spend time together with the Shezor anymore.'

I heard her muttering to Buddy. It never occurred to me what a nasty voice she had, and I was surprised by the Naddalin Natalie in it. I really did not know her well, certainly not enough to hate me - or so I thought. 'She is my friend; She's staying with us,' Buddy whispered honestly, but with some girth. I stopped to let Anny and Jeannette pass me. I did not want to hear any more.

At dinner that evening, Charlie seemed curious about my trip to La Poch that morning. He feels guilty about leaving me home alone on weekends, but he has been breaking the habit for years. Of course, he knew the names of the kids who went, and their parents, and their dads. He seemed to approve. I wondered if he would approve of my plan to go to Altoona with Melvin Shezor. Not that I was going to tell him.

'Dad, you know a place called Goat Rocks or something? It is south of Mount Rainier,' I asked casually.

'Yes, why?'

I shrugged. 'Some kids were talking about camping there.'

'Not a good place to camp.' He looked surprised. 'A lot of bears, a lot of people go there during the hunting season.'

'Oh,' I muttered. 'Maybe I got the name wrong.'

I thought I was going to sleep, but I woke up with extraordinary clarity. I opened my eyes and saw a bright yellow light shining through my window. I could not believe it. I rushed to the window to look, and sure enough, the sun was there. It was in the wrong place in the sky, too low, and did not look as close as it should have been, but it was the sun.

Clouds surrounded the horizon, but a large blue spot appeared in the center. I stayed by the window if I could, afraid the blue would disappear again if I let go.

Newton's Olympic clothing store was north of town. I saw the store but did not stop there - I had little interest in the supplies that needed to be out for a long time. I spotted Buddy's Suburban and Tyler's chin in the parking lot. When I stopped by their vehicles, I saw the group standing in front of the suburbs. J.A was there, I had a room with two other guys; I was sure their names were Chiaz and Joseph Shaw. Anny was there, next to Jeannette and Emily. Three other girls were standing next to them, including one that I remember going into the gym on Friday. She gave me a dirty look as I got out of the car and whispered something to Emily. Emily shook her corn silk hair and looked at me with disdain.

So, this will be one of those days.

At least Buddy was happy to see me.

'You have arrived!' He cried with joy. 'And I said it would be sunny today, didn't I?'

'I told you to come,' I reminded him.

'We're just waiting for Lee and Rebeca... unless they invite someone,' Buddy added.

'No,' I lied a little, hoping I would not be caught in a lie. But he wishes for a miracle, and Melvin appears.

Buddy looks pleased.

'Will you show up in my car? This van or Lee's mother.

'Naturally.'

He smiled happily. It was extremely easy to please Buddy.

'You can carry a gun,' he promised. I hid my anger. It was not easy to please Buddy and Charity-Anna at the same time. Now I see Charity-Anna beaming at us.

However, the numbers worked for me. Lee brought two more people and suddenly every seat was important. I put Anny in the front seat

of the Suburban between Buddy and me. Buddy could have been nicer about it, but at least Anny seemed calm.

It was only fifteen miles from the fork to La Poch, with beautiful, dense green forests covering most of the road and the wide Quilt River that sank twice beneath it. I was glad I had the window seat. We rolled down the windows - the Suburban was a little claustrophobic with nine people in it - and I tried to take in as much sunlight as possible.

I had often walked the beaches around La Poche with Charlie during the McAuley winter, so the miles of First Beach seemed familiar. It was still fun. The water was dark gray, even in the sunlight, with a white coating and a gray, rocky shore. The islands protruded from the waters of the steel port from clear cliffs to harsh heights and were crowned with a spectacular view. The beach had only a thin fringe of sand at the water's edge, behind which lay millions of large, smooth stones that from a distance looked a uniform gray, but up close they could have been stone of any shade- terracotta, sea green, lavender., blue- gray, dull gold. The tide line was dotted with large floating trees, white sharp in the salt tide, some huddled at the edge of the forest, some alone, out of the reach of the tide.

A cool, fresh wind came from the storm. Pelicans soar above the swell, and seagulls and a lone eagle circle overhead. The clouds still

surrounded the sky and threatened to invade at any moment, but now the sun shone boldly in the blue sky.

We went to the beach and Buddy led the way. There used to be a circle of fire filled with black ash. J.A and a boy I suspected were called Chiaz collected driftwood branches broken from dry piles at the edge of the forest and soon built a carpet-like structure on the old wooden floor.

'Have you ever seen a burning fire?' Buddy asked me. I sat on one of the bone-colored sofas; The other girls gathered on either side of me, gossiping excitedly. Buddy knelt by the fire and lit one of the small logs with a lighter.

'No,' I said as he carefully placed the shriveled branch on the tip.

'Then you'll like it- look at the colors.' Light another small branch and place it next to the first one. Soon the fire began to lick the dry wood.

'It's blue,' I said in surprise.

'Salt does that. Nice, isn't it?' He lit another piece, placed it where the fire had not yet caught and sat down next to me. Fortunately,

Anny was on the other side. She turned to him and demanded his attention. I watched the strange blue and green flames shoot into the sky.

After half an hour of discussion, some guys wanted to go for a walk to the nearby pools. He was in a dilemma. On the one hand, I love tide pools. It has fascinated me since childhood; They were one of the things I looked forward to when I wanted to get split. On the other hand, I also fell for it more than once. It is okay if you are seven and with your dad. It reminded me of Melvin's question - do not fall into the sea.

Emily was the one who made my decision. She did not want to go for a walk, and she wore the wrong shoes for it. Except for Jeannette and Charity-Anna, most of the other girls decided to stay on the beach. I waited for Tyler and J.A to promise to stay with them before I quietly left to join the walking group of fans. Buddy gave me a big smile when he saw me coming.

The walk was not too long, although I hated missing the forest air. The green light of the forest clashed with the laughter of the teenagers, too dark and uncoordinated with the flickering light around me. I had to watch every step I took carefully, remove branches from the roots and tops, and quickly fell behind. Finally, I broke through the emerald edge of the forest and found the rocky shore again. The tide was low, and he

passed the Thar River on his way out to sea. The gravel banks teemed with life in shallow pools of water that were never completely flooded.

I was incredibly careful not to lean too much on the small ocean pools. The others are not afraid, jump the rocks, jump on the rocks. I found a very stable-looking rock at the edge of the large pools and sat there carefully, with the natural underwater magic below me. Bunches of bright anemones constantly dissolve in the invisible current, curved shells curl up to the ends, hiding the crabs in them, starfish from the rocks and motionless from each other, and a small black eel with white racing stripes weaves in bright green grasses., waiting for the return of the sea. I was completely engrossed except for a small part of my mind that wondered what Melvin was doing right now and I tried to imagine what he would say if he was here with me.

Finally, the boys were hungry, and I quickly left to follow them. This time I tried to walk better in the forest, so of course, I fell a few times. I have superficial scratches on my palms and the knees of my jeans have turned green, but it could be worse.

On the way back to First Beach, the group we left behind was packed. As we got closer, we could see the sleek black hair and copper



skin of the new arrivals, young people from the reservation came to socialize.

The food was already distributed, and J.A introduced us as we each entered the driftwood as the children rushed to ask for a share. Jeannette and I were the last to arrive, and as J.A said our names, I saw a little boy sitting on the rocks by the fire looking at me with interest. I sat down next to Jeannette and Buddy brought us sandwiches and some soda. A boy, who turned out to be the oldest of the visitors, destroyed the names of his seven companions. What I saw was that one of the girls was named Charity-Anna, and the boy who noticed me was named Chiaz.

Sitting with Jeannette was relaxing; She was an easy person to be around - she did not feel the need to fill her silence with talk. She let me think without worrying while we ate. And I thought about how time is split into McAuley, sometimes passing in a blur, individual images that stand out more than others. Then, in a moment, every second was important, etched in my memory. I knew exactly what made the difference, and it bothered me.

At noon, the clouds began to move in, gliding across the blue sky, casting a moment against the sun, casting long shadows on the beach and the waves crashing. After they finished eating, the people split into

twos and threes and lay down. Some of them climbed to the top of the wave and tried to jump over the rocks. Others packed for a second trip to the tide pools. Buddy - with Charity-Anna's shadow - goes shopping in the village. Some local children went with them; Others went for a walk. By the time they all parted, I was alone in the trees, Emily and Tyler holding a CD player someone had brought them, and three teenagers, including a boy named Chiaz, sitting in a circle. The eldest son was the speaker.

A few minutes after Jeannette left with the passengers, Chiaz went to pick her up from my side. He looked fourteen, fifteen, and had long, shiny black hair in a bun at the back of his neck. His skin was beautiful, silky, and reddish brown; His eyes darkened above the high planes of his cheeks. There was still a trace of youth around his chin. Overall, an unbelievably beautiful face. However, my positive judgment about my appearance was damaged by the first words that came out of his mouth.

'You're Lill Natalie-Black, aren't you?'

It was like the first day of school all over again.

'Lilla,' I said.

'I'm Chiaz Naztherth.' He extended his hand in a friendly gesture. 'You bought my dad's car.'

'Oh,' I said with relief and shook his elegant hand. 'You're Mr. Black 's son. I should remind you.

No, I am the youngest in the family - you remember my older sisters.' 'Elizabeth and Becky,' I suddenly remembered. Charlie and Mr. Black stopped by several times during my visit to keep us busy while fishing. We were all too shy to move forward as friends. Of course, by the time I was 11, I had enough tantrums to go on fishing trips.

'Are they here?' I asked the girls by the ocean if I recognized them now.

'No.' Chiaz shook his head. 'Elizabeth got a scholarship to Washington State and Becky married a Samoan minister - now lives in Hawaii.'

'Wow, she's married,' I panicked. The twins were only a little over a year older than me.

'So how do you like the car?' He asked.

'I love it. It works great.'

'Yes, but it's too slow,' he laughed. 'I was happy when Charlie bought it. Even though we had a great car there, my father would not let me build another car.'

'Not so slow,' I said.

'Did you try to go over sixty?'

'I did not say.

'Well. Do not,' he smiled.

I could not help but smile back. 'It's great in a crash,' I offered with the bumper of my car.

'I don't think it's a monster sleeper that a tank can knock,' he agreed, laughing again.

'So, you make cars?' I asked in surprise.

'If I have time to spare and if I have parts. Do you happen to know I can get an expert cylinder for a 1956 Cadillac?' he added with a laugh. He had a pleasant, hoarse voice.

'Sorry,' I laughed, 'I haven't seen anything lately, but I'll keep your eyes open.' Like I knew what it was. He was amazingly easy to talk to.

He gave me a beautiful smile as he looked at me with admiration as I understood. I was not the only one who noticed.

'Do you know Lilla, Chiaz?' Emily asked - with what I thought was a volcano - from the fire.

'We've known each other since I was born,' he said, smiling back at me.

'How nice.' She did not feel any better and her pale, fishy eyes narrowed. 'Lilla,' she called again, looking intently at my face, 'I told Tyler it is too bad none of the speakers can go out today. No one remembered to invite them?' Her concern was ambiguous.

'Do you mean Dr. Melchor Shezor's family?' The tall, older boy asked without an answer, much to Emily's dismay. He was closer to the boy than the boy, and his voice was very deep.

'Yes, do you know them?' she asked, turning to him in the middle of the road.

The Shezor do not come here,' she said in a dismissive tone and ignored her question.

Tyler tries to get her attention and asks Emily about the CD in his hand. She was distracted.

I stared at Matfield, who was staring into the dark forest behind us. He said the Shezor did not come here, but His tone showed something else- they were not allowed. They were forbidden. His attitude made a strange impression on me, and I tried in vain to ignore it.

Chiaz interrupted my meditation. 'So, McAuley are already driving you crazy?'

'Oh, I would say that is an understatement. I was upset. He smiled deliberately.

I was still flipping through the short notes on Shezor and suddenly I was inspired. It was a stupid plan, but I did not have a better idea.' He hoped that young Chiaz was new to girls so he would not see my flirting as a pathetic attempt to be safe.

'Do you want to come to the beach with me?' I asked, mimicking Melvin's lead. I looked down at his eyelids. It could not have made any difference, I am sure, but Chiaz jumped willingly.

As we crossed the reef to the north and headed toward the floating ocean wall, the clouds finally settled in the sky, causing the sea to darken and the temperature to drop. I put my hands in my coat pockets.

'So, what Are you sixteen?' I asked, fluttering my eyelashes the way I had seen girls on TV, trying not to look stupid.

'I'm only fifteen,' he admitted flattered.

'Really?' My face was full of false surprise. 'I thought you were older.'

'I'm tall for my age,' he explained.

'Do you come to Forex a lot?' I asked deeply as if I hoped so. I felt stupid to myself. I was afraid he would turn on me in horror and accuse me of cheating, but he still looked cute.

'Not too much,' he said sullenly. 'But once I'm done with my car, I can go out as many times as I want- after I get my driver's license,' he added.

'Who was that other boy that Emily was talking to? He looks like a little old man walking around with us.' I deliberately put myself in favor of the young people to make it clear that I would choose Chiaz.

'It's Sam - he's nineteen,' he informed me.

'What was it about the doctor's family?' I asked.

'The Shezor? Oh, they should not come to the reservation.' A voice confirming what I heard on Pierre Island outside shouted.

'Why not?'

He bit me and looked back at me. 'A proper kidnapping.'

'Oh, I won't tell anyone, it's just curiosity.'

He replied, but he looked charming. One eyebrow raised and his voice was huskier than before.

'Awesome, do you like it?' asked

'I love them' I tried to smoke him.

He went to a nearby floating tree. While I was sitting on the trunk of the tree at one of the twisted roots of the stone, I saw that he was trying to do good with a wide smile on his lips. I focused on keeping a vital need out of my sight.

'Where did we come from -

'Of course, not'

'Well, there are many legends, some of which say that they were before the flood - like Noah and his ark to survive, the ancient Quilts



tied their ark to the top of the tall trees on the mountain. smiled... Another legend from wolves as we came to the wolves still our brothers are killing.

'The different one.'

'The cold ones?' I asked for my phone now without hesitation.

'Yes. As a wolf, legends as old as the cold ones, and some very recent ones. According to legend, an ancestor knew some of them. The contract was from you know.

'Your grandfather?' I encouraged her, 'Like my father, I was an elder of the clan. You see, the cold ones of the wolf's pit are natural enemies, not wolves, but like our ancestors, they are wolves that change bodies. Wolves.'

'Rumor, do they have wolves?'

'Just one'

I will change impatience to admiration,

'So, you see,' Chiaz continued, 'the Qazaqs are traditionally our enemies. When my great- great- grandfather came to our region, this pack was different. They were not like the others - they should not be dangerous to his tribe. So, my grandfather made a promise. To stay away

If you make a promise if you promise if you promise if you promise if you promise if you promise we were he said.' 'Do you have an answer for 'Kidnapping...?' to understand without struggling You do not know how seriously I take his obituary, and when am stupid enough to protest. 'Deliberately, he made a thick threat in his voice.

'What are you saying? said they did not hunt a person. It is thought that they were able to hunt animals.

I tried to relax my voice.' So how will he fit in with Shezor? Is your grandfather cold as I found them?

'No' he said surprisingly and paused 'They are the same too'

He must not have thought that the expression on my face was fear due to the story. he said, happy, and continued.

'Now there are more new women and new men than them, but the rest are the same. In my great- great- grandfather's time, they already knew the leader Melchor. Before your men arrived here, he left.' Struggling...

'And what are they?' I asked him 'What are the cold ones?'

'Nah' I thanked him, still seeing the storm.

'You need not wonder my father doesn't want us to tell anyone about this.'

I still have not been able to control my emotions to see him.'  
Do not worry, I will not give you 'I only broke the contract' he laughed.

'I'll take him to the grave' I promised I was shaking but nothing to Charlie...

.... Do not say do not say anything Ever since Dr. Shezor started working there when he heard that some of us were not going to the hospital my father was very.

A group of indigenous people or what?' Kana asked in a playful tone, but with a worried feeling. I still did not look away from the ocean. I turned around as much as I could and smiled as usual and said...

'No. But you are incredibly good at telling scary stories. I still have goose bumps, see?'

'Awesome.'

The sound of rocks screeching against each other on the beach alerted us that someone was approaching. Fifty yards away, Buddy and Charity-Anna could be seen walking toward us.

'Hey Lilla,' Buddy called out in relief, waving his hand over his head.

'Is that your boyfriend?' Buddy asked with an edge of jealousy in him, understanding. Voice- I was surprised that it was so clear.

'No, of course.'

'You should come in and see me. Sometimes I felt guilty when I spoke, that I was taking advantage of him. He was simply someone I would be friends with.

He smiled swarthy.

'Blood drinkers,' he replied in a cold voice. 'Your people call them vampires.'

I looked at the rough surf after he answered, not sure what my face was showing.

'You're making a mess of it,' he chuckled happily.

'You're a good storyteller,' I told her, still staring at the storm.

'But it is crazy, isn't it? No wonder my father does not want us to tell anyone about it.'

I still could not control my emotions to see him. 'Don't worry, I won't sell you.'

'I just broke the contract,' he laughed.

'I will take him to the grave,' I promised, then I panicked.

'Seriously, don't say anything to Charlie.' He was incredibly angry with my father when he heard that some of us were not going to the hospital since Dr. Shezor started working there.

'Of course, I won't.'

'So, you think we're superstitious natives or what?' he asked in a playful tone, but with some menace. I still have not looked down from the ocean.

I turned and smiled at him as usual.

No. You are particularly good at telling horror stories. I still have bumps, see? I raised my arm.

'Thats nice.' He smiled.

Then the sound of stones crashing against each other on the beach warned us that someone was approaching. We looked up at the same time to see Buddy and Charity-Anna walking towards us about fifty yards away.

'Here, Lilla,' Buddy shouted in relief, waving a hand over his head.

'Is he your friend?' Chiaz asked, understanding the jealousy in Buddy's voice. I was surprised that it was so clear.

'No, definitely not,' I whispered. I am extremely grateful to Chiaz and cannot wait to please him as much as possible. To do so, I carefully turned away from Buddy and glared at him. He smiled, enjoying my naughty flirtation.

'So, when I got my driver's license...' he began.

'You should come to my place in McAuley.' We can spend time together sometime. I felt guilty saying this knowing that I had taken advantage of him. But I loved Chiaz very much. He was someone I could easily be friends with.

Buddy came towards us; Charity-Anna took a few steps back. I saw his eyes appraising Chiaz, happy in his youth.

'Where have you been?' He asked even though the answer was right in front of him.

'Chiaz was telling me some local stories,' I volunteered. 'It was a lot of fun.'

I smiled warmly at Chiaz, and he smiled back.

'Okay,' Buddy paused, assessing the situation carefully as he looked at our friends. 'We're packing - looks like it's going to rain soon.'

We all looked up at the bright sky. It really looked like rain.

'All right.' I jumped. 'To come.'

'Nice to see you again,' Chiaz said, and I knew he was teasing Buddy a little.

'Of course, it was. The next time Charlie comes to visit Mr. Black, I will come too,' I promised.

A smile spread across his face. 'It would be great.'

'And thank you,' I added seriously.

I lifted the hood as we kicked the rocks into the parking lot. A few drops began to fall, forming a black stain on the stones where they landed. By the time we got to the outskirts of town the others had already

packed everything back up. I climbed into the back seat next to Jeannette and Tyler and announced it was my turn at the gun range. Jeannette looked out the window at the intensifying storm and Emily turned around in the middle seat to get Tyler's attention and I just leaned my head back against the seat and closed my eyes and tried hard not to think.

## 8 BAD DREAMS

I told Charlie I had a lot of homework and did not want to eat anything. He was excited about the basketball game, although, of course, I had no idea there was anything special about it, so he did not notice anything unusual in my face or tone.

Once in my room, I locked the door. I rummaged through my office until I found my old headphones and plugged them into my little CD player. I picked up the CD that Deann gave me for Christmas. It was one of his favorite bands, but they used too much bass and screaming for my taste. I put it in place and lay down on the bed. I put on my headphones, pressed play, and turned up the volume until my ears hurt. I closed my eyes, but the light kept coming in, so I added a pillow to the top half of my face.

I concentrated very intensely on the music, trying to understand the lyrics, to decipher the complex drum patterns. By the third



time I listened to the CD, I knew at least all the lyrics to the choruses. I was surprised to find that I ended up liking the band once I got past the chatter. I still must thank Phil.

And it worked. The devastating blows kept me thinking - which was the main purpose of the exercises. I listened to the CD over and over until I sang all the songs until finally fell asleep.

I opened my eyes to a familiar place. Knowing in a corner of my mind that I was dreaming, I recognized the green light of the forest. I could hear the waves crashing against the rocks somewhere nearby. And I knew if I found the ocean, I could see the sun. I tried to follow the sound, but then there was Chiaz Naztherth, who tugged at my arm, pulling me back into the darkest part of the forest.

'Chiaz? What happened? I asked. His face was terrified as he pulled with all his might against my resistance; I did not want to go into the dark.

'Run Lilla, you have to run!' - he whispered frightened.

'This way Lilla!' I recognized Buddy's voice calling from the dark heart of the trees, but I could not see it.

"Why?" I asked, still reaching for Chiaz's hands, desperate to find the sun.

But Chiaz let go of my hand and, with a cry, suddenly trembled, falling to the dark forest floor. He was writhing on the ground, and I stared at him in horror.

- Ah! I screamed. But he was not there. In his place was a large red-brown wolf with black eyes. The wolf turned away from me, pointing towards the shore, the fur on its shoulders bristling, a low growl coming from its bared fangs.

- Lilla, run! Buddy shouted behind me again. But I did not turn back. I watched the light come towards me from the beach.

- And-

Then Melvin came out from behind the trees, his skin barely glistening, his eyes black and dangerous. He raised his hand and motioned for me to come to him. The wolf growled at my feet.

I took a step forward, toward Melvin. He smiled then, and his teeth were sharp, pointy.

"Trust me," he purred.

I took another step.

The wolf lunged into the space between me and the vampire, its fangs aiming at the collarbone.

- Nope! I screamed as I jumped out of bed.

My sudden movement knocked the earphones from the CD player off the bedside table and it fell to the floor with a thud.

I always had the light on, and I was sitting fully clothed on the bed with my shoes on. I glanced at the clock on the dresser, confused. It was half past five in the morning.

I moaned, fell back, and fell flat on my stomach, kicking off my boots. However, I was too uncomfortable to go to sleep. I turned around and unzipped my jeans, tugging them awkwardly as I tried to stay level. I could feel a braid in my hair, an uncomfortable ridge along my scalp. I turned on my side and tugged on the elastic, quickly running my fingers through my braids. I pulled the pillow over my eyes again.

It was all pointless, of course. My subconscious dug up the very images I was trying so desperately to avoid. I had to face them now.

I sat up and my head felt dizzy for a minute as the blood flowed. First, I thought, happy to put it back on for as long as possible. I grabbed my bag from the bathroom.

However, the shower did not last as long as I had hoped. Even after taking the time to dry my hair, I soon ran out of things to do in the bathroom. Wrapping myself in a towel, I returned to my room. I could not tell if Charlie was still sleeping or if he was already gone. I went to look out the window and the cruiser was gone. Fish again.

I slowly put on my comfiest sweatpants, then made my bed - something I have never done. I could not live without it. I walked to my office and turned on my old computer.

I hated using the internet here. My modem was unfortunately outdated, and free services - were inferior quality; just plugging it in took so long that I decided to get myself a bowl of cereal while I waited.

I ate slowly, chewing each bite carefully. When I was done, I washed the bowl and the spoon, dried them, and put them away. My legs were dragging as I climbed the stairs. First, I walked over to my CD player, picked it up off the floor, and placed it squarely in the center of the table. I took out my headphones and put them in the desk drawer. Then I

played the same CD, reducing it to the point where it was background noise.

Sighing again, I returned to my computer. Naturally, the screen was covered with pop- up advertisements. I sat down in my stiff folding chair and started closing all the little windows. Eventually, I got to my favorite search engine. I shot a few more pop- ups, then typed a word.

Vampire.

Of course, it took a long time. When the results came in, there was a lot to sift through, from movies and TV shows to RPGs, underground metal companies, and gothic cosmetics.

Then I found a promising site - Vampires 101. I waited impatiently for it to load, quickly shutting down any ads that popped up on the screen. Finally, the screen was done - a simple white background with black text, and an academic look. Two quotes greeted me on the homepage

In all the vast mysterious world of ghosts and demons, there is no character so terrifying, no character so feared and hated, but so horribly admired, as the vampire, who is not himself a ghost, nor demon., but who

partakes of dark natures and has the mysterious and terrifying qualities of both? - Reverend Montague Summers.

If there is a well- documented history in this world, it is that of vampires. Nothing is missing minutes, sworn statements by famous people, surgeons, priests, and magistrates; the forensic evidence is the most complete. And with all that, who believes in vampires? - Rousseau.

The rest of the site was an alphabetical listing of all the different vampire myths that exist in the world. The first one I clicked on, Danang, was a Filipino vampire allegedly responsible for planting taro in the islands long ago. The myth had it that Dunag had worked with humans for years, but the partnership ended one day when a woman cut her finger and Dunag sucked on the wound, enjoying the taste so much that he completely emptied his body.

I read the descriptions carefully, looking for anything that sounded familiar, let alone believable. Most vampire myths seemed to center on beautiful women as demons and children as victims; they also seemed to be constructs created to explain the high death rate of young children and to give men an excuse for infidelity. Many stories involve disembodied spirits and warnings against improper burials. Few resembled

the movies I had seen, and only a few, like the Hebrew Estray and the Polish Upper, were even concerned with drinking blood.

Only three entries caught my attention the Variolas from Romania, a powerful undead creature that could appear as a pale- skinned handsome man, and the Nilasi from Slovakia, a creature so strong and fast it could kill a village whole in an hour after midnight., and another, Stergion benefice.

There was only a short sentence about the latter.

Stergion benefices An Italian vampire said to be on the side of good and the mortal enemy of all evil vampires.

It was a relief to have a little record, a myth among hundreds claiming the existence of good vampires.

In general, however, little matched Chiaz's accounts or my observations. As I read, I made a little catalog in my mind and carefully compared it with each myth. Speed, strength, beauty, pale skin, eyes that change color; then Chiaz's criteria bloodsuckers, werewolf enemies, cold skins, and immortals. There were very few myths that corresponded to a single factor.

And another problem I remember from the few horror movies I have seen that was reinforced by today's reading - vampires could not come out during the day, the sun would burn them to ashes. They slept in coffins all day and only came out at night.

Exasperated, I turned off the computer's main switch without waiting for everything to turn off properly. Through my irritation, I felt extreme embarrassment. Everything was so stupid. I was sitting in my room researching vampires. What is wrong with me? I have decided that most of the blame lies with the city gates of McAuley - and the entire wet Olympic Peninsula for that matter.

I had to leave home, but I did not want to go anywhere except on a three- day trip. I put my boots on anyway, not knowing where I was going, and went down. I put on my raincoat, oblivious to the weather, and tapped on the door.

It was cloudy, but it had not rained yet. I ignored my car and headed east on foot, cutting an angle across Charlie's yard toward the woods that kept coming. Soon I was so sunk that you could not see the house or the road, you could only hear the lapping of the wet ground under my feet and the sudden cries of a jay.



There was a thin sliver of the path through the forest here, otherwise, I would not have risked wandering like this on my own. My sense of direction was hopeless; I could get lost in a much less useful environment. The path went deeper and deeper into the forest, mostly to the east as far as I could tell. It coiled like a snake around the Sticha firs, hemlocks, yews, and maples. I only vaguely knew the names of the trees around me, and all I knew was thanks to Charlie pointing them out to me from the cruiser window earlier. Many I did not know and some I could not be sure of because they were covered in green pests.

I followed the trail as my anger at myself pushed me forward. When it started to go down, I slowed down. A few drops of moisture trickled down from the canopy above me, but I could not be sure if it had started to rain or if it were just puddles left over from the day before, high in the leaves above me, slowly falling back to the field. A recently fallen tree - I knew it was new as it was not completely covered in moss - rested against the trunk of one of its sisters, creating a sheltered bench a few feet up the trail. I stepped over the fern and carefully sat down, making sure my jacket was between the wet seat and my clothes wherever it touched, and leaned my hooded head against the living tree.

This was not where we came from. I should have known, but where else was there to go? The forest was a rich green and too peaceful like last night's scene. Now that my wet footsteps could no longer be heard, the silence was piercing. The birds were also calm, the drops were increasing, so it must have been raining overhead. The fern was over my head now that I was seated, and I knew someone could pass in the way, within a yard of me, and not see me.

Here in the trees, it was much easier to believe the nonsense that baffled me inside. Nothing had changed in this forest for thousands of years, and all the myths and legends from hundreds of different countries seemed much more likely in this green mist than in my room.

I forced myself to focus on the two most important questions that needed to be answered, but I did so reluctantly.

First, I had to decide if it was possible that what Chiaz had said about the Shezor was true.

My mind at once reacted with a sharp negative. It is senseless and painful to think of such ridiculous notions. But what then? I asked myself. There was no rational explanation for how I was alive at that time.

I told in my head what I had seen incredible speed and strength, the color of the eyes changing from black to gold

and vice versa, an inhuman beauty, a pale and cold skin. And more - the trivial things that slowly spread - how they never seemed to eat, the uncanny grace with which they moved. And so, as they sometimes say, unfamiliar cadences and phrasing are better suited to the style of a turn-of-the-century novel than a 21st-century classroom. He skipped class the day we did the blood test. He would not turn down a trip to the beach until he heard where we were going. He knew what everyone around him was thinking...except me. He told me he was mean, dangerous...

Could the Shezor be vampires?

Well, they were something. Before my disbelieving eyes, something beyond the possibility of rational justification was happening. Melvin Shezor was not...human, whether it was cold Chiaz or my superhero theory. He was something more.

So - it is possible. That should be my answer for now.

- And-

Then the most important question of all. What was I going to do if it was true?

If Melvin were a vampire - I could barely bring myself to think of the words - then what should I do? It was certainly not possible to involve someone else. I could not even believe it myself; anyone I talked to about it would hire me.

Only two options seemed practical. The first thing is to listen to his advice, be smart and avoid him as much as possible. Cancel our plans, go back to ignoring him as much as possible. Imagine there is an impenetrable wall of glass between us in the same classroom where we were forced together. Tell him to leave me alone - and seriously this time.

A sudden agony of despair washed over me as I considered this alternative. My mind dismissed the pain, quickly moving on to the next choice.

I could not do anything else. If he was anything...sinister, he had not hurt me so far. I would have been a hole in Tyler's wing if he had not acted so quickly. So quickly I argued that it could be pure reflexes. But if it were a reflex to save lives, how bad could it be? - I replied. My head was spinning with no response.

I was sure of one thing when I was sure of everything. The dark Melvin in my dream last night was only a reflection of my fear of the

word Chiaz said, not of Melvin himself. Even so, when I screamed in terror at the werewolf's attack, it was not the fear of the wolf that brought the cry of 'no' to my lips. It was the fear that he would be hurt - even as he called out to me with his sharp fangs, I feared for him.

- And-

Then I knew I had my answer. I did not know if there was ever a choice. I was already too deep. Now that I knew - if I knew - there was nothing I could do about my terrible secret. Because when I thought of him, his voice, his hypnotic eyes, the magnetic power of his personality, I wanted nothing more than to be with him right now. Even if... but I could not think that. Not here, alone in the darkening forest. While the rain darkened it like twilight under the canopy and beat like footsteps on the dull earthen floor. I shivered and quickly got up from my hiding place, fearing that the trail would somehow disappear with the rain.

But there it was, safe and clean, appearing from the dripping green maze. I rushed after him, my hood pulled over my face, surprised to almost run through the trees in the distance. I started to wonder if I was going at all, or if I was following the path further into the forest. However, before I could panic, I started to see open spaces through the webbed branches. And then I heard a car speeding down the street and I was free,

Charlie's lawn stretched out before me, the house beckoned me with the promise of warmth and dry socks.

It was just after noon when I went inside. I went upstairs and dressed for the day, jeans, and a T- shirt since I was staying home. It did not take much effort to focus on my task for the day, the Macbeth article due Wednesday. I just tackled the draft, calmer than I had felt since... well, Thursday, to be honest.

However, that has always been my path. Making decisions was a painful part for me, a part I suffered from. But once the decision was made, I stuck with it, relieved that the choice was made. Sometimes the relief was tinged with despair, like my decision to come to McAuley. But it was still better than struggling with the alternatives.

This decision was ridiculously easy to live with. Dangerously easy.

- And-

So, the day turned out calm and productive - I finished my work before eight o'clock. Charlie came home with a big catch, and I remembered that I would be in Altoona the following week to pick up a fish cookbook.

The shivers that ran down my spine every time I thought of that trip were no different from the ones I felt before going for a walk with Chiaz Naztherth. They must be different, I thought.

They disagree, I think. I am afraid - I know I am afraid, but I do not feel the right fear.

I had no dreams that night, starting my day so early, and I slept so badly the night before it left me tired. Again, when he arrived at the McAuley, I awoke on a sunny day to bright yellow light. He jumped to the window, and I was surprised that there were hardly any clouds in the sky, which were just small white fluffy bubbles, it could not be raining. I opened the window- - surprised by the silent opening, not sticking, not opening for years- - and drew in the dry air. It was warm and there was almost no wind. My veins are full of electricity.

Charlie was having breakfast when he came down, and he sensed my feelings at once.

'Good day,' he said.

'Yes,' I agree with a smile.

He was smiling back; his eyes were soft. When Charlie laughed, it was easier to understand why my premature wife and mother.

Most of the romance of youth that had faded away in those days, before I knew it, my curly hair - my color, if not the same texture - had diminished, slowly becoming increasingly clear of her skin. forehead but when he smiles, I can see a little of the man who spoke to Allison when he was two years older than I am now.

I happily ate my lunch, watching the sunshine through the back window on the dusty ditch. Charlie said goodbye and I heard the cruiser leave the house. I hesitantly walked to the door and put my hand on the pan. Fate tries to leave the house. With a sigh, I folded my arm and stepped into the brightest light I had seen for months.

With a lot of challenging work, I was able to roll down the windows of both trucks completely. I was the first to get to school, I hurried out the door without even looking at my watch. I parked the car and walked towards the rarely used picnic benches on the south side of the cafeteria. It was still a little damp in the seat, so I sat on my coat and was happy to use it. My homework is done - a product of a slow social life - but there are some trigonometry questions I am not sure if I am doing right. I carefully took out my book, but in examining my first day's dream, I saw the sun shining on the red bark of the tree. I drew casually in the



margin of the assignment. After a few minutes, I suddenly realized that I had seen five pairs of black eyes. I punched them out with the eraser.

'Lilla,' I heard someone call, as Buddy sounded.

I looked around and saw that the school was full, and I was sitting there without thinking. They all wore T- shirts, and some even wore pants, even though the temperature was not above sixty. Buddy asks me in khaki pants and a striped football shirt.

'Hey Buddy,' I called, waving to him that he could not be away this morning.

He came to me sitting, shining the brightest gold in the light, and smiling on his face. He was so happy to see me, and I could not help the feeling.

'I've never noticed before - your hair is red,' he commented, pretending to have strands of hair fluttering in the breeze.

'Only in the sun.'

When he closed the lock behind his ear, I was a little uncomfortable.

'Isn't it a good day?'

'I like the day,' I agreed.

'What did you do yesterday?' His tone was a little more subtle.

'I spend most of my time writing my dissertation.' I did not add what I was doing - I did not need it to sound good.

He struck his forehead with the heel of his hand. 'Oh, yes - that's Thursday, right?'

'Come on, Wednesday, I think.'

'Mercury?' 'It's not good... what are you writing?'

'Is Shakespeare's treatment of female characters misogynistic.'

Looked at me like I just spoke in pig Latin.

'I think I'm going to have to work tonight,' he said deflated. 'I was going to ask if you wanted to go out.'

'Oh. I was caught off guard. Why can't I have a fun conversation with Buddy without being blocked anymore?'

'Okay, we can go to dinner, or I can do something.' 'Buddy...'

'I hate putting there., wondering if his thoughts were here as well.'

'I think...if you repeat what I'm saying now, I'll happily shoot you to death,' I threatened, 'but I think Charity-Anna's feelings will be happy.'

'Charity-Anna?'

'Really, Buddy, you're blind?'

'Oh,' she breathed dizziness. I used this to escape.

'It's time for class, I can't be late anymore.' I took my book away and put it in my bag.

walked in silence to building 3, his face a little distracted. I hope he put whatever thoughts he had in the right way.

When I saw Charity-Anna in Trig, she was burning. She, Jeannette, and John are coming to Big Sur tonight to buy clothes for the show, and she wants me to come, although I do not need them. I doubt it. It is nice to be out of town with a few girlfriends, but Emily will be there. Who knows what I will do tonight... but it is the wrong way for my mind to wander. Of course, I am happy with the sun. But not exactly to my euphoria at the time, not even close.

- And-

Then I gave him a chance and told him I would speak to Charlie first.

He was talking alone about dancing on the way to the Spanish, and when the class was finally over, he did not seem to stop, five minutes late, and on his way to lunch. We were I noticed most of what he said. It is not just him, but all the Shezor family that I desperately want to see - bringing them to the new doubts that haunt me. As I entered the threshold of the dining room, the first real sting of fear slides down my spine and settles in my stomach. Do they know what I am thinking? Then I had another feeling - will Melvin wait to sit me down again?

As is my custom, I first looked at the Shezor' desk. I shuddered in my stomach when I realized it was empty. With hope fading, I scanned the rest of the dining room, hoping to find him waiting for me alone. The place was almost full- the Spaniards had just made us- but there was no sign of Melvin or any of his family. Loneliness struck me with a force of weakness.

I wandered behind Charity-Anna, too lazy to pretend to listen.

We arrived so late that everyone was already at our table. I avoided the empty chair next to Buddy in favor of Jeannette. Dimly, I

noticed that Buddy was gently holding Charity-Anna's chair, his face lit up.

Jeannette asked a few quiet questions about the Macbeth paper, which I answered as naturally as I breathed down in pain. He even invited me to join him tonight, and now it is clear that something is distracting me.

When- I entered the biology major and saw his empty seat, I realized that I was holding on to extreme hope and felt a new wave of disappointment.

The rest of the day passed slowly and sadly. In the gym, we had a lesson about the rules of badminton, and this was the gun they had for me. But at least it means I must sit and listen for a cross-field block. The best part is that the coaching is not done, so I will have another day tomorrow. But the next day he would never arm me with a net and deliver me to the rest of the race.

I am glad to be off campus, so I am free to pout and moan before I leave tonight with Charity-Anna et al. But as I walked behind Charlie's door, Charity-Anna called to cancel our plans. I tried to be happy that Buddy asked her to dinner. I was relieved to finally be seen popping

up - but the excitement sounded fake to my ears. She rescheduled our shopping trip for tomorrow night.

It gives almost no disturbances. I had kipper for lunch, salad and bread left over from the night before, so there was nothing to do there. I spent half an hour on my homework, but then I finished it too. I settled my email backlog of my mother's letters and became increasingly clever as they progressed to the present. I sighed and typed quickly.

Mom, I am sorry. Already about I am. I went to the beach with a few friends. I had to author a dissertation.

My excuse was pathetic, so I gave up.

Today it is extra sunny - I know, I am too shocked - so I am going out there and vitamin D as much as possible. I love you

Lilla- I decided to kill the Hour with a non- school- related lesson. I have a small collection of books that come with me to the Fox, and one of the most finished is the illustrated work of John Austen. I chose one, and walked towards the backyard, flicking a towel from the closet at the top of the stairs.

In the small area of Charlie's square, I put a blanket in the middle, and I put it on the happy grass from the shade of the trees, which

is always a little damp, although the sun shines for a long time. I lay on my stomach as I crossed my ankles in the air, flipping through the different stories in the book to see which one would hold my mind the most. My favorites are *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. I recently read the first book, so I started reading *Sense and Sensibility*. Only after reading the third book did I remember that the first story happens to be named *Melvin*. I turned indignantly to *Mansfield Park*, but the prime minister of that article was named *Edmund*, who was too close. Was there no other name at the end of the eighteenth century? I closed the book and rolled in anger. I pushed up my sleeves and closed my eyes. Just think about the heat of the skin, I tell myself harshly. The breeze is still light, but it tickles my face. I pulled out all my hair over my head, spread my shawl over my head, and once more the ardor fell upon my eyelids, my cheeks, my nose, my lips, my arms, and my neck through a light coat.

The next thing I realized was the versatile sound of Charlie's brick lane cruiser. I sat down in a daze, seeing that the lights were gone, and slept behind a tree. I looked around, confused, and suddenly felt that I was not alone.

'Charlie?' I asked. But I could hear his front door slam shut.

He jumped up, foolishly impatient, and picked up the now wet cloak and the book. I ran into the stove to heat the oil and realized that dinner would be late. When I came in, Charlie was putting on his belt and getting out of his boots.

'I am sorry dad; dinner is not ready - I slept outside. I yawned.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I want to find out about the game anyway.'

I watched TV with Charlie after dinner, looking for something to do. I did not want to watch anything, but he knew that I did not like Kickball, that I had turned into some non- brainy sitcom that neither of us liked. He still seemed happy to do something together, even though I was down, good for him He feels happy to do it. He promises to cook, you want to pick me... do you think if I am with them?'

'Charity-Anna Benddover?' And he spoke.

'Graciela Yang.' 'I groaned when I told him the details. He was confused. 'But you are not going to dance? 'No, Father, but help me find their clothes - you know to give them constructive criticism.' 'I do not have to explain this to the woman.



'Oh well. 'He seemed to know that he was doing something with the girls outside of his farm.' School was at night, though. '

Leave after school and come back in the morning.' Are you okay with dinner?'

I was feeding the Bellas seventeen years ago before you came here,' he reminded me.

'I don't know how they survived,' I murmured, then added more clearly, 'I will put a sliced sandwich in something cold. Is it okay, okay? Like above.'

The morning was sunny again. I awoke with new hope and tried to hold back my grimace. For the weather I wore a navy- blue V-neck shirt, this was a hard winter in Phoenix. I had planned my arrival at school so that I hardly had time for class, I flew around in a depressed mood looking for an empty seat, even a silver Volvo, which does not seem to be parked in the last row, spoke in English. He arrived in haste, panting for the last Lily, but in a soft voice,

just like yesterday - I just could not stop the little hope that was sprouting in my head, I just got carried away and looked for restaurants in vain. He sat at the empty biology table.

Tonight, Big Sur kicks off the program once again, and since John has other commitments and has become more attractive. I hurried out of town to stop looking and hoped to see him pop in. I swear I will be in a good mood tonight, and Jeannette or Jay Aguilar will not spoil the fun of finding clothes. I can even get some clothes. I do not want to think I am the only one shopping. In Altoona this weekend, no more in the earlier interests, it certainly will not be without at least telling me Cancelled.

After school, Charity-Anna followed me home in her old white Mercury so I could drop off the books and the car. While I was inside, I quickly let down my hair, and since I felt slightly excited about leaving the fox, I left a note for Charlie on the table, explained again where dinner was and changed my purse from a school bag to one, I rarely used. and we ran together with Jay Aguilar, then we came to Jeannette's house, who was waiting for us my excitement increased when we drove out of the city.

## 9 PORT ANGELES

Anny was faster than the chef, so we were in Big Sur at 606. It had been a while since I had had a girl's night out and the estrogen boost was invigorating. We listened to whiny rock songs while Charity-Anna talked about the guys we were spending time together with. Charity-

Anna's dinner with Buddy had gone well and she was hoping they would go to the first kiss stage on Saturday night. I smile to myself, satisfied. Jeannette was passively happy to go to the ball, but not interested in J.A. Anny tried to get her to admit who her type was, but I cut her off after a while with a question about dresses, to spare her. Jeannette gave me a grateful look.

Big Sur was a wonderful little tourist trap, much more polished and quirkier than McAuley. But Charity-Anna and Jeannette knew that all too well, so they were not going to waste time on the scenic bayside promenade. Anny went straight to the only department store in town, a few blocks from the visitor- friendly bay.

The dance was billed as semi-formal, and we were not sure what that meant. Charity-Anna and Jeannette both looked surprised and in disbelief when I told them I had never been to a prom in Phoenix.

'You've never been with a friend or what?' Anny asked dubiously as we walked through the doors of the store.

'Really,' I tried to convince her, without telling her about my dancing problems. 'I never had a boyfriend or anything close. I did not go out much.'

'Why the hell not?' Charity-Anna asked.

'Nobody asked me,' I answered honestly.

She had l 'People ask you here,' she reminded me, 'and you say no.' We were now in the junior section, scanning the shelves for fancy clothes. for Tyler,' Jeannette corrected softly

'Excuse me?' I gasped. 'What did you say?' Charity-Anna said, eyes suspicious.

'What did he say?' I looked like I was choking.

'I told you that wasn't true,' Jeannette muttered to Charity-Anna.

I remained silent, still absorbed in shock that quickly turned to irritation. But we had found the clothes racks and now we had work to do.

'That's why Emily doesn't like you,' Charity-Anna chuckled as we searched through the clothes.

I gritted my teeth. 'Do you think if I crashed my car, he won't feel guilty about the accident anymore?'

'Maybe,' Anny chuckled. 'If that's why he's doing it.'

The clothing choices were not huge, but they both found a few things to try I sat in a low chair just inside the locker room by the one-way mirror trying to control my smoking Anny was torn between two - one a long number basic black strapless, the other a knee-length electric blue with spaghetti straps. I encouraged her to go for blue; why oh do the eyes not play? Jeannette chose a light pink dress that hugged her long body and brought out honey tones in her light brown hair. I generously complimented them both and helped by returning the rejected pieces to their shelves. The entire process was much shorter and easier than the comparable trips I had taken with Allison at home. There was something to be said about the limited choices.

We went to buy shoes and accessories. While they tried things on, I just watched and criticized, not in the mood to shop for myself, even if I needed new shoes. After I was annoyed with Tyler, the girls' nighttime euphoria faded, giving way to the gloom to return.

'Jeannette? I started hesitantly as she tried on a pair of strappy pink heels - she was thrilled to have a date long enough for her to wear high heels.

Charity-Anna had walked over to the jewelry counter, and we were alone.

'Yes?' She stretched out her leg and twisted her ankle to see the shoe better.

I dropped. 'I like that one.'

'I think I'm going to have them, although they never match this dress,' she mused.

'Oh, come on, they're on sale,' I encouraged her. She smiled and put the lid back on a box of more practical off-white shoes.

I tried again. 'Uh, Jeannette...' She looked up curiously.

'Is it normal that the...Shezor' - I kept my eyes on the shoes - 'don't go to school often?' I failed miserably in my attempt to appear flippant.

'Yes, when the weather is nice, they go backpacking all the time - even the doctor. They are all out there,' she told me softly, also checking her shoes. She did not ask a single question, without talking about the hundreds that Charity-Anna would have dropped. I started to like Jeannette.

'Oh.' I dropped the subject when Charity-Anna came back to show us the rhinestone jewelry, she had found that matched her shoes. Wahad planned to eat at a little Italian restaurant on the boardwalk, but the

clothes shopping did not take as long as we expected. Anny and Jeannette put their clothes back in the car and then walked to the bay. said I would meet them at the restaurant in an hour - I wanted to find a bookstore They were both willing to come with me, but I encouraged them to have fun - they did not know how busy I could be when I was surrounded by books; it was something I preferred to do alone. They walked happily chatting to the car and I drove in the direction Anny pointed.

I had no trouble finding the bookstore, but it was not what I was looking for. The windows were full of crystals, dreamcatchers, and spiritual healing books. I did not even enter. Through the window, I could see a woman in her fifties with long gray hair cut straight down her back, wearing a 60s dress, smiling from behind the counter. I decided this was a conversation I could skip. There must have been a regular bookstore in town.

I wandered the streets that were filling up with the end of the working day, hoping to go downtown. I did not pay much attention to where I was going; I struggled against despair. I tried so hard not to think about him, and what Jeannette said... and more than anything, I tried to beat my hopes for Saturday, fearing a disappointment more painful than

the others, when I looked up to see someone's silver Volvo parked along the street and it all came to me. Stupid, untrustworthy vampire, I thought.

I stomped further south, toward glass-fronted shops that looked promising. But when I arrived, they were just a repair shop and a space. I still had too much time to find Anny and Jeannette, and I had to calm down before seeing them again. I ran my fingers through my hair several times and took a deep breath before turning the corner.

As I crossed another road, I began to realize that I was going in the wrong direction. The few pedestrians I saw were heading north, and it looked like the buildings here were mostly warehouses. I decided to head east around the next corner and after a few blocks turn around and try my luck on another street on the way back to the boardwalk.

A group of four men rounded the corner where I was going, dressed too casually to come home from the office, but they were too dirty to be tourists. As they approached me, I realized they were not too many years older than me. They joked among themselves, laughed exuberantly, and punched each other in the arms. I slid as far down the sidewalk as I could to give them space, then walked quickly and looked behind them to the corner.



'Hi there!' one of them shouted when they passed, and he had to talk to me because there was no one else around. I automatically looked up. Two of them had stopped, and the other two had slowed down. The closest, a burly, dark-haired man in his twenties, seemed to be the one who had spoken. He wore an open flannel shirt over a dirty T-shirt, cropped jeans, and sandals. He took a half-step toward me.

'Hello,' I mumbled, a thoughtful response. Then I quickly looked away and walked faster towards the corner. I could hear them laughing at full volume behind me.

'Hey, wait!' one of them called out to me again, but I kept my head down and turned the corner with a sigh of relief. I could still hear them laughing behind me.

I was on a sidewalk that led to the back of several gloomy warehouses, each with large doors for unloading trucks, with a padlock for the night. The south side of the street had no sidewalks, just a barbed wire fence that protected some sort of engine parts warehouse. I had wandered far beyond the part of Big Sur that I was supposed to see as a guest. It was getting dark, I realized, the clouds finally came back, piling up on the western horizon, creating an early sunset. The sky to the east was still clear, but gray, interlaced with pink and orange streaks. I had left my coat

in the car and a sudden shiver made me cross my arms tightly over my chest. Only one van passed me, then the road was empty.

The sky suddenly darkened and as I looked over my shoulder to stare at the offending cloud, I realized with a shock that two men were walking quietly six meters behind me.

They belonged to the same group that I had passed on the corner of the street, but the black man who had spoken to me was not either. I at once turned my head forward and quickened my stride. A shiver that had nothing to do with the weather made me shiver again. My bag hung on a shoulder strap, and I slung it across my body like you should carry it, so it would not be ripped off. I knew exactly where my pepper spray was - still in my gym bag under the bed, never unpacked. I did not have much money on me, only twenty-something, and I thought about 'accidentally' dropping my bag and walking away. But a small, fearful voice inside me warned me that they could be worse than thieves.

I listened carefully to their silent footsteps, which were far too soft compared to the impetuous noise they had made before, and it did not seem like they were speeding up or getting closer. Breathe, I had to remind myself. You do not know they are following you. I kept walking as fast as I could without really running, concentrating on the right turn

which was only a few meters away. I could hear them as far away as before. A blue car hit the south street and quickly passed me. I thought about jumping on it, but I hesitated, braked, not knowing if I was being chased, and by then it was too late.

I reached the corner, but a glance revealed it was just a blind alley in the back of another building. I was half expecting; I had to hastily correct myself and run down the narrow alley to the sidewalk. The street ended at the next corner, where there was a stop sign. I focused on the light steps behind me and decided whether to run or not. They were ringing further away, however, and I knew they could at least outrun me. I was sure to trip and stretch if I tried to go faster. The footsteps were certainly further back. I ventured a glance over my shoulder, and they were forty feet behind now, I saw with relief. But they were both looking at me.

~\*~

It seemed like an eternity before I got around the corner. I kept my steady pace, the men behind me trailing behind with every step. They realized they feared me and regretted it. I saw two cars driving north past the intersection I was heading toward and felt relieved. There would be

more people if I got out of this deserted street. I hop around the corner with a grateful sigh.

- And-

Then skidded to a stop.

The street was bordered on both sides by empty walls, without doors, and without windows. In the distance, at two intersections, I saw streetlamps, cars, and more pedestrians, but they were all too far away. Because against the west building, halfway down the street, sat the other two men in the group, both watching excitedly as I froze to death on the sidewalk. I then realized that I was not being followed.

I was driven to this.

I only stopped for a second, but it felt exceptionally long. I turned around and ran across the road. I had a significant sense that it was a wasted effort. The footsteps behind me were stronger now.

'There you are!' The booming voice of the stocky dark- haired man broke the intense silence and startled me. In the growing darkness, he was looking behind me.

'Yes,' a voice shouted behind me, making me jump again as I tried to hurry down the street. 'We only took a short detour.'

My steps must have slowed down now. I too quickly reduced the distance between me and the couple in the living room. I let out a good cry and sucked in the air, preparing to use it, but my throat was so dry I was not sure how much volume I could handle. With a quick movement, I slid my pack over my head and grabbed the strap with one hand, ready to put it back on or use it as a weapon if needed.

The stocky man shrugged as I cautiously stopped and walked slowly down the street.

'Stay away from me,' I warned in a voice that must have sounded strong and fearless. But I was right about the dry throat - no volume.

'Don't be like that, honey,' he shouted, and the hoarse laughter started up behind me again.

I stiffened, feet apart, trying to remember through my panic what little self- defense I knew. The heel of the hand comes up, hopefully breaking the nose or pushing it into the brain. Finger in the eye socket - try to hook and pull out the eye. And the standard knee to the groin of course. That same pessimistic voice in my head spoke then, reminding me that I would not stand a chance against one of them, and that was four. Shut up!

I commanded the voice before terror could bring me down. I did not go out without bringing someone. I tried to swallow it so I could let out a decent cry.

The headlights suddenly turned around the corner, the car nearly hit the stocky, forcing her to jump onto the sidewalk. I jumped on the road - this car would stop or hit me. But the silver car came unexpectedly and skidded to a stop with the passenger door open a few feet away from me.

'Come in,' ordered an angry voice.

It was amazing how the suffocating fear disappeared instantly, amazing how the sense of security suddenly overwhelmed me - even before I was off the street - as soon as I heard his voice. I jumped up on the chair and slammed the door behind me.

It was dark in the car, no lights had come on when the door opened, and I could barely see his face in the glow of the dashboard. The tires squealed as he veered north, accelerated too quickly, and swerved toward the dazed men on the street. I spotted them diving down the sidewalk as we straightened up and ran towards the harbor.

'Put on your seatbelt,' he ordered, and I realized I was holding the seat with both hands. I quickly obeyed; the click when the strap was attached was loud in the dark. He took a sharp left turn, raced forward, and went through several stop signs without a break.

But I felt completely safe and was not worried at all about where we were going at this point. I stared into his face with deep relief, relief beyond my sudden release. I studied his flawless features in the dark, waiting for my breathing to return to normal, until I realized his expression was deadly angry.

'Are you OK?' I asked, surprised at how hoarse my voice sounded.

'No,' he snapped, angrily.

I sat in silence watching his face as his burning eyes stared straight ahead until the car came to an abrupt stop. I looked around, but it was too dark to see anything but the faint silhouette of the dark trees that lined the road. We were out of town.

'Lilla?' he asked, his voice tight, controlled.

'Yes?' My voice was still hoarse. I calmly tried to clear my throat.

'How are you?' He still was not looking at me, but the anger was clear on his face.

'Yes,' I moaned softly.

'Please distract me,' he ordered.

'I'm sorry, what?'

He execrated abruptly.

'Just talk about something unimportant until I calm down,' he clarified, closing his eyes, and pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

'Uh.' I broke my brain for something insignificant. 'Am I going to crush Tyler Crowley before school tomorrow?'

He still closed his eyes, but the corner of his mouth was shaking.

'Why?'

'He tells everyone he's taking me to prom - either he's crazy or he's still trying to make up for the fact that I was almost killed last... well, you remember, and he thinks it's kind of the ball rolling, that's the right way to go So, I'm suggesting that if I put his life in danger, we're even, and



he can't keep trying to make it right I don't need enemies and maybe Emily would back down if he left me alone Maybe I should total his Sentra But if he doesn't have an elevator he can't take anyone to the prom promo...' I stammered.

'I heard about it.' He looked a little calmer.

'You, did it?' I asked in disbelief, my earlier irritation flared up. 'If he's paralyzed from the neck down, he can't go to the ball either,' I mumbled, refining my plan.

Melvin sighed and finally opened his eyes.

'Better?'

'Not really.' But he stopped talking. He leaned his head against the seat and stared at the ceiling of the car.

I have been waiting, hasn't it?' My voice came out in a whisper.

'Sometimes, I have a problem with my mood, Lilla.' He whispered too, and as he stared out the window, his eyes narrowed into slits., 'But it wouldn't do me any good to turn around and look for this...' He did not finish his sentence, looking away and struggling for a moment

to regain control of his anger. 'At least,' continued he said, I try to convince myself.

'Oh.' The word seemed inappropriate, but I could not think of a better answer.

We sat in silence again. I glanced over. Looked at the clock on the dashboard. It was half past five.

'Charity-Anna and Jeannette are going to be worried,' I mumbled. 'I should have met them.'

He started the engine without a word of more, turned smoothly and accelerated towards the city. We were under the streetlights in no time, always too fast, weaving with ease through the slow-moving cars on the curb. It parked parallel to the curb in a space I had thought was far too small for the Volvo, but it slipped in effortlessly at once. I looked out the window to see the lights of La Lilla Italia, and Anny and Jeannette, who had just left, running away from us in fear. 'did you know where...?' I started, but then I just shook my head. I heard the door open and turned to see him exit.

'What are you doing?'

I asked. He smiled a little, but his eyes were hard. He got out of the car and slammed the door. I rushed out of the car too. He was waiting for me on the sidewalk.

He spoke before I 'Go arrest Charity-Anna and Jeannette before I must find them too. I do not think I can hold myself back if I bump into your other friends again.'

I shivered at the menace in her voice.

'Anny! Jeannette!' I yelled at them and motioned for them to turn around. They ran towards me, the distinct relief on both of their faces simultaneously turning to surprise when they saw who I was standing next to. They hesitated a few meters from us.

'Where were you?' Charity-Anna's voice sounded suspicious.

'I'm lost,' I admitted shyly. 'And then I bumped into Melvin.' I waved at him,

'Would it be okay if I went with you? I have never used his talents in them before.' Like

I was not very well - I am not hungry.' I shrugged.

'I think you should eat something.' Melvin's voice was low, but full of authority. He looked up at Charity-Anna and spoke a little louder. 'Do you mind if I take Lilla home tonight? So, you do not have to wait while she eats.'

'Um, no problem, I guess...' She bit her lip, trying to say. my expression if I wanted to. I winked at him. I wanted nothing more than to be alone with my eternal savior. There were so many questions I could not bombard until we let us be alone.

'Okay.' Jeannette was faster than Charity-Anna. 'See you tomorrow, Lilla...Melvin.' She grabbed Charity-Anna's hand and pulled her towards the car, which I could see a short distance away. distance, parked across the first street. When they walked in, Anny turned around and waved a curious face. I waved back, waiting for them to leave. Frankly, I was not hungry,' I insisted, looking up to examine his face. His expression was unreadable.

'Make me happy.'

He walked to the door of the restaurant and held it open with a stubborn expression. Obviously, there would be no further discussion. With a resigned sigh, I walked past him into the restaurant.

The restaurant was not busy - it was off season in Big Sur the host was a woman, and I understood the look in her eyes as she assessed Melvin. She greeted him a little warmer than necessary. I was surprised at how much it irritated me. She was several centimeters taller than me and was abnormally blond. A table for two? His voice was seductive, whether he was aiming at it or not. I saw his eyes move to me and then back away, pleased with my obvious banality and the careful, contactless space Melvin kept between us. She led us to a table large enough for four in the center of the busiest part of the dining room.

I was about to sit down, but Melvin shook his head.

'Maybe a little more private?' He calmly asked the host. I was not sure, but it looked like he was gently tipping her. I had never seen anyone turn down a table, except in old movies.

'Without a doubt.' She looked as surprised as me. She turned and led us around a fence to a small circle of cabins - all empty. 'How is it?'

'Perfect.' He flashed her his bright smile, numbing her for a moment.

'Uh' - she shook her head and blinked - 'your server is coming soon.' She walked unsteadily.

'You really shouldn't do this to people,' I slammed. 'It is not fair.'

'Do what?'

'So, dazzle them - she's probably hyperventilating in the kitchen right now.'

He looked confused.

'Oh, come on,' I said hesitantly. 'You have to know what effect you have on people.'

He tilted his head to one side and his eyes were curious. 'I blind people? '

Haven't you noticed?' Do you think everyone gets their way so easily?

He ignored my questions. 'Am I blinding you?'

'Often,' I admitted.

-And-

Then our server arrived, waiting for his face. The host had certainly gotten behind the scenes, and this new girl did not look disappointed. She pushed a lock of short black hair behind one ear and smiled with unnecessary warmth.

'Hello. My name is Taylor, and I will be your server tonight. What can I make you drink? I did not miss her talking to him alone.

He looked at me.

'I'm going to have a Coke.' It sounded like a question.

'Two Cokes,' he said.

'I'll get to that in a minute,' she assured him with another useless smile. But he did not see it. He looked at me.

'What?' I asked when she was leaving.

His eyes stayed on my face. 'How do you feel?'

'I'm fine,' I replied, surprised by his intensity.

'Don't you feel dizzy, sick, cold...?'

'I'm going?'

He laughs at my surprised tone.

'Well, I'm actually expecting you to be in shock.' His face twisted into that perfect crooked smile.

'I don't think that will happen,' I said when I could breathe again. 'I've always been very good at deleting unpleasant things.'

'Still, I'll feel better if you have sugar and food in you.'

Just in time the server arrived with our drinks and a basket of breadsticks. She stood with her back to me as she placed them on the table.

'You chose?' She asked Melvin.

'Lilla? He asked. She turned to me involuntarily.

I chose the first thing I saw on the menu. 'Uh...I'll have the mushroom ravioli.'

'And you?' She turned to him with a smile.

'Not for me,' he said. Of course not.

'Let me know if you change your mind.' The shy smile was still there, but he did not look at her and she left unsatisfied.

'Drink,' he ordered.



I obediently sipped my soda, then drank deeper, surprised at how thirsty I was. I realized I was done when he pushed his glass toward me.

'Thank you,' I mumbled, still thirsty. The chill of the ice-cold soda ran through my chest, and I shivered.

'Are you cold?'

'It's just the Coke,' I explained, shivering again.

'You don't have a coat?' His voice was disapproving.

'Yes.' I looked at the empty sofa next to me. 'Oh - I left it in Charity-Anna's car,' I realized.

Melvin took off his jacket. I suddenly realized that I had never noticed what he was wearing - not just tonight, but someday. I just could not look away from his face. I let myself watch now, concentrating. He has now taken off a light beige leather jacket; underneath he wore an ivory turtleneck sweater. It fitted her perfectly and emphasized how muscular her chest was.

He handed me the jacket and interrupted my eyelid.

'Thank you,' I said again, slipping my arms into his coat. It was cold, as my coat smelled when I first picked it up in the morning, hanging in the drafty hallway. I grimaced again. It smelled good. I interceded and tried to recognize the wonderful smell. It did not smell of cologne. The sleeves were far too long; I slid them to free my hands.

'That shade of blue goes well with your skin,' he said looking at me. I was surprised; I looked down, blushing naturally.

He pushed the breadbasket towards me.

'Really, I'm not going to be in shock,' I protested.

'You should be - a normal person would be. You do not even look shocked.' He seemed agitated. He looked into my eyes, and I saw how clear his eyes were, clearer than I had ever seen them, golden caramel.

'I feel very safe with you,' I confessed, mesmerized by the idea of telling the truth again.

This displeased him; his alabaster eyebrow wrinkled. He shook his head, frowning.

'It's more complicated than expected,' he muttered to himself.

I grabbed a breadstick and started nibbling on the end to gauge his expression. I wondered when it would be good to question him.

'You're normally in a better mood when your eyes are this bright,' I remarked, trying to distract him from the thought that had him frowning and gloomy.

He stared at me, stunned. 'What?'

'You're always grumpier when your eyes are black - I expect that,' I continued. 'I have a theory about it.'

His eyes narrowed. 'More theories?'

'Mm- hm.' I chewed on a small bite of the bread, trying to look indifferent.

'I hope you were more creative this time... or are you still stealing from comic books?' His faint smile was mocking; his eyes were still tight.

'Well, no, I didn't get it from a comic book, but I didn't produce it on my own, either' I confessed.

'And?' he prompted.

But then the server strode around the partition with my food. I realized we had been unconsciously leaning toward each other across the table because we both straightened up as she approached. She set the dish in front of me - it looked good - and turned quickly to Melvin.

'Did you change your mind?' she asked. 'Isn't there anything I can get you?' I may have been imagining the double meaning in her words.

'No, thank you, but some more soda would be nice.' He gestured with a long white hand to the empty cups in front of me.

'Sure.' She removed the empty glasses and walked away.

'You were saying?' He asked.

'I will tell you about it in the car. If...' I paused.

'There are conditions?' He raised one eyebrow, his voice ominous.

'I do have a few questions, of course.'

'Of course.'

The server was back with two more Cokes. She sat them down without a word this time and left again.

I took a sip.

'Well, go ahead,' he pushed, his voice still hard.

I started with the most undemanding. Or so I thought. 'Why are you in Big Sur?'

He looked down, folding his large hands together slowly on the table. His eyes flickered up at me from under his lashes, the hint of a smirk on his face.

'Next.'

'But that's the easiest one,' I objected.

'Next,' he repeated.

I looked down, frustrated. I unrolled my silverware, picked up my fork, and carefully speared a ravioli. I put it in my mouth slowly, still looking down, chewing while I thought. The mushrooms were good. I swallowed and took another sip of Coke before I looked up.

'Okay, then.' I glared at him and continued slowly. 'Let's say, hypothetically of course, that... someone... could know what people are thinking, read minds, you know - with a few exceptions.'

'Just one exception,' he corrected, 'hypothetically.'

'All right, with one exception, then.' I was thrilled that he was playing along, but I tried to seem casual.

'How does that work? What are the limitations? How would... that someone... find someone else at exactly the right time? How would he know she was in trouble?' I wondered if my convoluted questions even made sense.

'Hypothetically?' He asked.

'Sure.'

'Well, if... that someone...'

'Let us call him 'Scotty,' I suggested.

He smiled wryly. 'Scotty, then. If Scotty had been paying attention, the timing would not have needed to be quite so exact.' He shook his head, rolling his eyes. 'Only you could get into trouble in a town this small. You would have devastated their crime rate statistics for a decade, you know.'

'We were speaking of a hypothetical case,' I reminded him frostily.

He laughed at me; his eyes warm.

'Yes, we were,' he agreed. 'Shall we call you 'Jane'?'

'How did you know?' I asked, unable to curb my intensity. I realized I was leaning toward him again.

He was wavering, torn by some internal dilemma. His eyes locked with mine, and he was making the decision right then whether to simply tell me the truth.

'You can trust me, you know,' I murmured. I reached forward, without

thinking, to touch his folded hands, but he slid them away minutely, and I pulled my hand back.

'I don't know if I have a choice anymore.' His voice was a whisper. 'I was wrong - you're much more observant than I gave you credit for.'

'I thought you were always right.'

'I used to be.' He shook his head again. 'I was wrong about you on one other thing, as well. You are not a magnet for accidents - that is not a broad enough classification. You are a magnet for trouble. If there is anything dangerous within a ten- mile radius, it will invariably find you.'

'And you put yourself into that category?' I guessed.

His face turned cold, expressionless. 'Unequivocally.'

I stretched my hand across the table again - ignoring him when he pulled back slightly once more - to touch the back of his hand shyly with my fingertips. His skin was cold and hard, like a stone.

'Thank you.' My voice was fervent with gratitude. 'That's twice now.'

His face softened. 'Let's not try for three, agreed?'

I scowled but nodded. He moved his hand out from under mine, placing both of his under the table. But he leaned toward me.

'I followed you to Big Sur,' he admitted, speaking in a rush. 'I have never tried to keep a specific person alive before, and it is much more troublesome than I would have believed. But that is just because it is you. Ordinary people make it through the day without so many catastrophes.' He paused. I wondered if it should bother me that he was following me; instead, I felt a strange surge of pleasure. He stared, wondering why my lips were curving into an involuntary smile.



'Did you ever that the thoughts, that maybe my number was up the first time, with the van, and that you've been interfering with fate?' I guessed, distracting myself.

'That wasn't the first time,' he said, and his voice was hard to hear. I stared at him in amazement, but he was looking down. 'Your number was up the first time I met you.'

I felt a spasm of fear at his words, and the abrupt memory of his violent black glare that first day... but the overwhelming sense of safety I felt in his presence stifled it. By the time he looked up to read my eyes, there was no trace of fear in them.

'You remember?' He asked for his angel's face grave.

'Yes.' I was calm.

'And yet here you sit.' There was a trace of disbelief in his voice; he raised one eyebrow.

'Yes, here I sit... because of you.' I paused. 'Because somehow you knew how to find me today...?' I prompted.

He pressed his lips together, staring at me through narrowed eyes, deciding again. His eyes flashed down to my full plate, and then back to me.

'You eat, I'll talk,' he bargained.

I quickly scooped up another ravioli and popped it in my mouth.

'It is harder than it should be - keeping track of you. Usually, I can find someone very easily once I have heard their mind before.' He looked at me anxiously, and I realized I had frozen. I made myself swallow, then stabbed another ravioli and tossed it in.

'I was tracking Charity-Anna, not carefully - like I said, only you could find trouble in Big Sur - and at first, I did not notice when you took off on your own. Then, when I realized that you were not with her anymore, I went looking for you at the bookstore and I saw her head. I could tell that you had not gone in and that you had gone south...

- And-

I knew you would have to turn around soon. So, I was just waiting for you, randomly searching through the thoughts of people on the street - to see if anyone had noticed you so I would know where you were. I had no reason to be worried... but I was strangely anxious...' He was lost in thought, staring past me, seeing things I could not imagine.

'I started to drive in circles, still... listening. The sun was finally setting, and I was about to get out and follow you on foot. And then - ' He stopped, clenching his teeth together in sudden fury. He tried to calm himself.

'Then what?' I whispered. He continued to stare over my head.

'I heard what they were thinking,' he growled, his upper lip curling slightly back over his teeth. 'I saw your face in his mind.' He suddenly leaned forward, one elbow appearing on the table, his hand covering his eyes. The movement was so swift it startled me.

'It was very... hard - you can't imagine how hard - for me to simply take you away and leave them... alive.' His voice was muffled by his arm. 'I could have let you go with Charity-Anna and Jeannette, but I was afraid if you left me alone, I would go looking for them,' he admitted in a whisper.

I sat quietly, dazed, my thoughts incoherent. My hands were folded in my lap, and I was leaning weakly against the back of the seat. He still had his face in his hand, and he was as still as if he had been carved from the stone his skin resembled.

Finally, he looked up, his eyes seeking mine, full of his questions.

'Are you ready to go home?' he asked.

'I'm ready to leave,' I qualified, overly grateful that we had the hour-long ride home together. I was not ready to say goodbye to him.

The server appeared as if she had been called. Or watching.

'How are we doing?' She asked Melvin.

'We're ready for the check, thank you.' His voice was quiet, rougher, still reflecting the strain of our conversation. It muddled her. He looked up, waiting.

'Sure,' she stuttered. 'Here you go.' She pulled a small leather folder from the front pocket of her black apron and handed it to him.

There was a bill in his hand already. He slipped it into the folder and handed it right back to her.

'No change.' He smiled. Then he stood up, and I scrambled awkwardly to my feet.

She smiled invitingly at him again. 'You have a nice evening.'

He did not look away from me as he thanked her. I suppressed a smile.

He walked close beside me to the door, still careful not to touch me. I remembered what Charity-Anna had said about her relationship with Buddy, and how they were in the first-kiss stage. I sighed. Melvin heard me, and he looked down curiously. I looked at the sidewalk, grateful that he did not seem to be able to know what I was thinking.

He opened the passenger door, holding it for me as I stepped in, shutting it softly behind me. I watched him walk around the front of the car, amazed, yet again, by how graceful he was. I should have been used to that by now - but I was not. I had a feeling Melvin was not the kind of person anyone got used to.

Once inside the car, he started the engine and turned the heater on high. It had gotten very cold, and the mild weather was at an end. I was warm in his jacket, though, breathing in the scent of it when I thought he could not see.

Melvin pulled out through the traffic, without a glance, flipping around to head toward the freeway.

'Now,' he said significantly, 'it's your turn.'

## 10 Souls

Close your eyes if you want,' she said.

I did not. I was not scared. I looked at her and her eyes started to turn green, and her jaw dropped like she saw something scary. She suddenly recovered. It is normal, 'I will hug myself in the fog. I calm myself down. They were in my old room, sitting on my couch.

Nevaeh sighed but smiled softly.

Lily shrugs and looks across the cafeteria. I followed her gaze, my heartbeat suddenly quickened, and blood rushed to my face.

At the table at the end of the cafeteria is Gabriel Sinclair. He did not seem to notice that his football teammates were joking with each other, and he stared at me with wide eyes.

It was as if my stomach suddenly went to my throat. My first show was a fun inch to wipe my mouth, worried about where my tuna sandwich had crumbs.

She frowned at him, a big man like their father, capable of punching with the best of them. He was also taller than most men in the courtroom, he was at least a foot taller than her and could intimidate the

best of them. Although he does not look scary, to most people, he is handsome.

I was sitting on the bus trying to draw the shapes of blurry figures speeding by. The rain misted the glass and all I could see were trees. The man sitting next to me was snoring like a pig, and the child behind me kept kicking my chair. Even so, I sat and threw it, hoping to go further and further.

I folded my legs over my chest, wrapped my arms around my calves, and leaned my head against the foggy window, hoping for a good night's sleep. No matter how far this bus goes, this will be my last stop.

~\*~

A desolate place with dusty shop windows and old men in rocking chairs. This is the quickest way for me to describe a stop in a town far enough away that I have found. Dust swirls around my boots and sticks to my shirt. I did my best, carrying two large suitcases and walking down the dirt road leading to the city center.

I need to find a motel, and I need to find it fast.

'Are you all right, dear?' I did not even notice the little old lady who happened to walk by my side. I am a young girl with nowhere to go.

'Yes ma'am, I'm fine', I lied and put on a fake smile, I hope this will work. She saw it right away.

'I beg to differ. Honey, how old are you?'

I am not sure I should tell this woman my real age. I looked a little old for my age, so I decided that lying was my best bet.

'Miss Sixteen, high school student,' I said bluntly, trying to bypass her and avoid further confrontation. But the old ladies will not give up so soon.

'I may be old, but I am not stupid. Now, wait here, and I will see how much cash I have in my wallet.' The old woman turned and walked back to her porch steps, and I took the opportunity to disappear.

'If you have a bank account, I can write to you', the woman cannot see me anymore, and if I hold my breath long enough, she cannot hear me either. I looked at the woman looking at where I was standing with a confused look on her face. She looked both ways down the dirt road, then shrugged and walked slowly up the stairs.

I made myself invisible for a while as I followed the trail into town. I try not to give myself too much attention. I am not doing well because I have curious bystanders. This town does not seem to have many



tourists. I found a dirty sign that said, ' The Bayard Motel', or at least tried it.

Walk in and it smells like buffed leather and mothballs. Glad I could finally put my suitcase down; I staggered to my desk and rang the rusty Lily. It has not been used in a while.

'That little lady, is there anything I can help you with?!' A strong country accent came from behind. Anyone in town would call it pure hill Amsel.

'Well, I want a room,' I said, wondering what they would think when they saw me. I do not think a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old girl would get a room like this.

'Well, of course, I mean you came to the motel without tea?' followed by a hoarse cough, then the sound of boots dragging on the hardwood floors.

'Yeah,' I tried to stand a little higher when the man came around the corner. He is what you could call your average western cowboy. He had a scruffy mustache, a ten-gallon hat, a beer Bellay, boots, and a large, buckled belt.

Then buckle up and sit on the stool in front of the counter. He opened a dusty binder and turned to a new page.

'Okay, I need to see ID and social security numbers,' he said formally, twisting his beard. I almost choked, and my face turned red. I completely forgot that ID is needed.

'I- um- I' I was startled when Chuck started laughing because he had never laughed before.

'Escape every time. What is this? A fancy hotel? I do not need ID. Just your name and the cash on the front.' Chuck patted his right knee, reading his pencil.

'Wait, how do you know I'm a runaway?' I said, starting to rethink the whole idea of running away. Is it that easy to read me?

'Young girls like you are always in and out', I do not know much about Motels, but I know it does not look like people have ever set foot in that place. 'Now, your name?'

I hesitated before saying it clearly and forcefully.

'Melvin'

Lilla looked around the school park. No more empty tables, everyone has someone talking.

She was never close to anyone and was considered odd at school. She thinks colleges should 'take care of their own business', but obviously, that is not possible in a small town like theirs. Everyone is in their business. Probably because she likes those big glasses and baggy long shirts and Jeans, long black hair always in a mess. She just likes to be comfortable.

Luckily, someone had just finished eating and the seat was empty, so she hurriedly put the tray there and sat down. did need not to care that did need not to have friends, sometimes lonely, she ices used to it. Anyway, she did not need to come to school to make friends, she came to study and graduate, so she could work and earn money. After dinner, she decided to lie down on the long wooden bench, Putting the earphones on her ears and listening to nothing. She just wanted to pretend she could not hear anyone. She closed her eyes and was about to walk away when someone interrupted her.

'Er... miss? the

boy would walk away thinking she could not hear him. Just a heads up, I am wearing headphones. Isn't that the usual 'I don't want to be disturbed' sign?

'Sorry,' he said again, Knocking on the table this time.

She sighed and sat up to stare at a boy who was about to stare at him, but he... looked cute. So cute. A boy must be an understatement.

'Yes?' she asked slowly, the headphones still on.

'This table.' He shouted, thinking she could not hear, and pointed to the table. 'Reserved.'

She raised an eyebrow at him, trying not to smile. 'I can hear you perfectly. No yelling.'

Oh... sorry, I thought you could not just because you were wearing headphones.' ' he explained shyly, smiling at her. She just shrugged and he said nothing, he continued, 'This table is ours. I mean, I am not going to kick you out, just Chiaz hates people sitting here because you are cute, I warn you. He even grinned when he complimented her. Even gave me a shy smile.

She nodded, though she did not understand what he was talking about. She was gone when someone put her arm around her. She

looked up and saw a man with long black hair. 'Aaron, as soon as Chiaz finds out you're taking a girl, he'll kill you. '

Not my girl,' the boy said as Aaron raised his hands, palms up.

Lily posted on camera. She was born. She has done it so many times and it is starting to get boring. She is wearing black lace underwear that complements her long black hair and fair skin. The shoot will be for an adult magazine cover. It is not that bad - what she wears - she wears less. She does not mind, it is work. And it pays well.

She has a lot of billboards and calendars everywhere. She even offers some TV shows, but she always turns them down. She is great with what she is doing now. A few minutes later, the photographer called for a package. Buddy, her manager, walked up to her, holding a bouquet, and handed her a robe. She smiled and thanked him.

'Someone sent this to you,' Buddy said. He handed her the flower. It was an arrangement of pink gerberas, red carnations, and white mums, wrapped in purple wrapping paper and tied with a ribbon. It used to be beautiful.

'No cards yet?' asked Lilla, smelling the flowers.

'No,' Buddy said. 'But they are very pretty flowers.'

I remember when I first walked the runway, I got the same flowers. I wonder who sent it,' 'A fan, but I am surprised fans still have not tried to contact you. They have been with you since the beginning, even before you were not that popular,' Buddy said. 'Anyway, are you hungry?'

I am starving.' I cannot believe this shot lasted for hours. she complained. 'My stomach is dying.' Do you have anything to eat there?'

Sorry, I did not bring it. Let us eat together.'

I should have asked you to order earlier. I must go home. Mom is waiting.' She pursed her lips and frowned, 'I'm so hungry.' '

'Then let's eat first, there is a food stall outside, or there is a canteen here, I will let someone buy us something to eat.' Buddy urged.

'No, I'll be fine,' she said with a sigh. 'I will change and go to my mother's house for dinner. She cooks a lot. 'Do you want to come with me?'

No, the girlfriend is waiting.' He shrugged and grinned at her.

She smiled. 'Okay, I'll go alone.' If I starve to death on the road, do not kill yourself. '

He rolled his eyes. 'Like.' Do not overreact, girl.'

She nodded. She was taken aback by what happened suddenly. She was just resting, and now there were three people in front of her.

Broken said in a monotone, throwing the earphones on the table. Lilla's eyes widened at the rudeness. He did not even apologize for breaking her earphones. He was the one who stepped on it. Rude The guy looked back at the man who was holding Lilla just now. 'I told you not to bring anyone here, Chase,' he said in a cold tone.

'I swear Chiaz, I do not know her. I saw her with Aaron. He pointed at the cute boy.

Aaron shook his head too. 'Hey, it's not me, I just saw her here, maybe she's waiting for you.',

turned his gaze back to Lilla and surveyed her from head to toe. 'She's not my type.' Lily raised her eyebrows and sneered. Just because you are handsome... 'B- hole,' she whispered and left them.

Lilla stared absently at the text, not understanding anything about it. In the school cafeteria again, everyone is so noisy and busy doing their own thing. She prefers to plug her ears with headphones, but she does not remind her that she needs to buy a new one after school.

When someone sat next to her when she opened a bar of chocolate and started nibbling. She looked at the intruder and saw Aaron. Lovely guy.

'What's going on? he asked gleefully.

The students around became a little quieter, and Chase followed Matt. They all sat in front of her and Aaron.

'No seats.' Matt blurted out.

Aaron chuckled, 'Man, you sound defensive. '

'Shut up.' Matt stared at him.

She looked at the two, then at Chase. 'What are you doing here?' '

As Matt said, there are no seats. Chase shrugged.

She raised an eyebrow. 'You could have sat with the others.' not me. '

Actually,' Aaron said casually. 'We're not going to sit- '

Matt broke his arm with a punch. 'Eat all of you.' '



They all ate in silence. It was embarrassing. Lilla looked at them suspiciously, then looked at her book while nibbling on chocolate. She decided to ignore them. She was alone anyway because they were all Quiet.

'So, Lily, won't those chocolates make you fat? Aaron asked after a few minutes of silence. 'Oh!' he yelled and glared at Matt. 'If you don't stop hurting me, I'll date Lill!' An eyebrow at him and glared at him, but he blushed before looking away. 'I don't think you can say that about people's food choices.'

Lily applauded Matt's comment but ignored it, saying instead 'How do you know my name?'

'I did. Chase raised his hand like he was in class. 'I hacked into the school database,' he said, laughing.

'Ah...' she said. 'Thought I had to do that.' '

'What! The three of them said in unison. People around watched more of their shouting.

She grinned at them, revealing fully sculpted dimples. Their reactions were amusing.

'Have you hacked into the school's database before?' Chase whispered to her. She nodded smugly. 'Yes, it's easy.' To be honest, it is not very safe. She looked at her watch and finally noticed the time. 'I have to go.' She got up and left without saying goodbye to the three.

Lily sat on the stairs leading to the fire exit. Whenever she needed to make peace with her rowdy roommates, she liked to hang out there, who always chattered about things she was not interested in. She also likes to give them privacy because sometimes she notices that they get quiet whenever she walks into the room. She really cannot blame them, and she does not try to get close to them

She was half awake and half asleep when someone opened the door. She had already lowered the steps, so she opened her eyes and saw... Matt. Dreaming, she thought about it and closed her eyes again. She should have been more worried because Ise's used to seeing Matt in her dreams, that Hast's been happening a lot lately.

'What are you doing here?' asked Dream Matt.

She opened her eyes again, looking puzzled. 'Am I dreaming?'

He was amused by her cuteness. 'No, you're not, you can't sleep here.'

She breathed angrily and sat up. She remembered him kicking her out of the cafeteria before. 'Why can't I? Do not tell me you own this place too.'

No, I did not...' he said guiltily. He approached her and sat beside her. 'You can't sleep here because...you'll catch a cold.' See what you are wearing.'

She looked down at herself. 'It is very respectable. She is wearing a knee-length shirt and some shorts.

'Yes, it's...but it's thin,' he pointed out and looked away.

She rolled her eyes, deciding not to respond to his comment. 'You're in What's going on here, anyway?'

Here,' he said, taking something out of his hoodie.

She looked at his outstretched hand and saw that he was holding a blue earphone. She raised an eyebrow at him and took it out of his hand. Take the headset. 'What is this?'

Headphones,' he said clearly. 'I broke your earphones before and you called me an asshole,' he recalled, laughing. 'B- hole,'

'Do you have to repeat it?' She said she felt a little shy about her behavior that day. She did not know he heard it after they spent time together in the cafeteria for the second time. She checked the earphones. It had different shades of blue on the wires, and there was a small dot on the back of the earbud. Heart. 'Cute,'

'I know it's cute...' he shrugged and murmured. 'That's why I chose it for you.,

did not know what to say. She did not know why he was here either. With her.

After a few minutes of eerie silence, she asked innocently to break the atmosphere. 'This is the first time someone has called you a butt.'

Not really,' he laughed when he replied. 'So many girls called me when I broke up with them.'

Want to...' Lilla rolled her eyes. 'When you broke up with them...'

~\*~

'Yes, when I broke up with them,' he said.

'You don't have to sound so smug; I don't think that's something you should be proud of.'

I am just telling the truth.'

She sighed and changed the subject 'What year are you from?'

I am in my final year. I should be busy right now. How about you? he asked.

'First grade.' She frowned, thinking about how many years she needed to be in college.

'You hate studying?' Matt noticed her frown at once.

'Not really, I was just... thinking about how a piece of paper is so expensive to die for,' she explained. 'Once he found out I was talking about this, Dad was going to kill me.'

'Your father?' He asked.

'Yes, my dad.' He recruited me here thinking I would be fine. He wants me to be a successful person. She snorted. 'Looks like...'

'My dad looks a lot like your dad,' he said with a smile.

'Where's your dad?'

Somewhere outside,' she said. She looked at her watch again. 'Got to go.' See you later. She waved, and he left before he could say anything.

'You've done it twice now.' Goodbye.'

Thinking of this, his hands clenched into fists and his fangs were about to stretch out. He grabbed her like a raiding serpent and pulled her towards him, he bet it was scary, she could feel Every millimeter of the tough body.' He gasped unexpectedly as she twisted him. She stopped at once, startled by his response to her physical evidence.

'Lily girl. He gasped. 'You're in big trouble now!' ' A low rumbling from the depths of his throat echoed through the room turned into a growl, and he bared his white teeth. His fangs sprouted from hunger.

They locked her eyes, and stared at her in horror, Hooking her face with their hands. With desire flashing in his blue eyes, he lowered his mouth to face her, 'You let me stay for one night. Make effective use of your time. I get a safe word, no permanent marking... oh, one more thing. You better make me scream with joy! Looking at the smile on his face, she reckoned that few girls were giving orders to him.

'Turn around,' he growled, spinning her around so her back was turned away from him. Taking a step back. Watching her half-stark body appear from her skirt, she heard him gasp. 'I thought I told you to turn around,' he hissed, 'I never allowed you to move!' '

Feeling his strength made her even more excited. If he kept going like this, she was not sure she would make it through the night. He growled when she heard him moving around and the sound of an old latch being opened. Get up. Do not know what is going to cheer you up and try to listen as hard as you can.

Melvin pulls more than a few things out of there, gosh, she wants him to be gentle with her. She seems confident, but it is her first time Leaving the house was also the first night in her life. He sensed the distracting thoughts she was afraid of, he walked towards her, wrapped her arms around her and she was now bare waist and murmured 'Relax. I will not do anything you do not want me to do...unless you secretly want me to. 'He got to the end, relaxed a little under his touch and she nodded, then Melvin picked her up and threw her high on his bed with a girly beep before he had her, she tried to hold her breath and move the pins under his now shirtless body. If she could be a man, this is the result. Not too muscular, but still toned and chiseled. Perfect skin that seemed to slide

over him without hair The slight muscles, just the way she likes it. It makes it easier for her to work her tongue out without those hairs tickling.

Everything goes dark before her eyes get to her lower body. Then she feels something around her eyes Getting tighter. Blindfolded, she would not mind normally, she had had this fantasy before, but with Melvin? She would rather see his face. Sigh helplessly, leaning against the bed, waiting to see what he has in store for her...

'If you move, I will be forced to whip you. If you understand, nod your head,' Melvin ordered. He came back a few minutes later and started tying her wrists to the posts of his bed. He pulled tight, just to make sure she could not move too much. Bend Leaning down so she could feel his warm, sweet breath on her face, she asked, 'Will you keep quiet until I let you talk, or let me stop your mouth? Not sure if she was allowed to answer the question, she remained silent. 'Good girl,' he said, kissing her cheek. The first touch of his lips on her skin made her blood boil. Her other senses were elevated by not being able to see, but now she does not care...she is fully prepared now.

She panted when she felt a warm mouth around one of her small chests, and then a sharp pain as he did to it. It was like being bitten by him, only the teeth were not as sharp. Whatever it was, the pain was



accompanied by a burning sensation of pleasure spreading all over her body with the heat, he moved his lips to her neck, feeling the veins pulsing beneath her. His fangs stretched, piercing her skin. She cried and hunched out of the bed. Melvin clenched her hair to keep her from moving, then sucked on her neck.

She quickly put her hands on his shoulders, looked up at his face, pulled him down, and kissed him slowly.

### 11 questioning

On the morning of the interrogation, I had a tough time arguing with the part I thought last night was a dream. Logic is not on my side, nor is common sense. I cling to parts I cannot imagine, like her perfume. I am sure I never would have dreamed of it.

It was foggy and dark outside my window, perfect. He has no reason not to go to school today. I was wearing heavy clothes and remembered that I did not have a jacket. Further proof that my memory is real.

When I went downstairs, Charlie was gone again - I was running later than I thought. I swallowed granola in three bites, ran it

straight from the milk carton, and ran out the door. I hope the rain will wait until I find Charity-Anna.

Unusually foggy. The air was almost full of thick smoke. The mist was chill, stuck to the bare skin of my face and neck. I cannot wait to warm up my car. The fog was so thick that I walked a few yards down the driveway before realizing there was a car inside a silver car. My heart pounded, stammered, then recovered in double the time.

I did not see where it came from, but suddenly it was there, and the door opened for me.

'Do you want to ride with me today?' he asked, amused by my expression as he surprised me again. There was uncertainty in his voice. He gave me a choice I was free to say no, and part of him hoped so. This is a vain hope.

'Yes, thank you,' I said, trying to keep my voice calm. When I entered the warm compartment, I noticed his tan jacket dangling from the passenger seat's headrest. The door closed behind me, and he quickly sat down beside me and started the car.

'I brought you your jacket. I do not want you to get sick or anything.' His voice was cautious. I noticed he was not wearing a jacket

himself, just a light white tank-top shirt. The tissue was pressed back against his muscular chest. Keeping your eyes off his body is a huge tribute to him.

'I'm not that refined,' I said, but I pulled my jacket to my knees and tucked my arms into the long sleeves, curious to see if the smell could be as good as I remembered. This is better.

'It is not true?' Her voice was so low that I was not sure she wanted me to hear it.

We drive on foggy roads, always too fast, and we feel uncomfortable. At least they are. All the walls collapsed last night ... all of them.

I do not know if we are still honest today. It makes me stammer. I wait for you to speak.

He turned and smiled at me. 'What, not twenty questions today?'

'Does my question bother you?' I asked, relieved.

'Not as much as you do.' He looked like he was joking, but I cannot be sure.

I frowned. 'Am I not responding well?'

'No, that is the problem. You are so calm about everything, it is unnatural. I wonder what you are thinking.'

'I always tell you what I really think.'

'You modify,' he accused.

'Not much.'

'Enough to drive me crazy.'

'You don't want to hear it,' I muttered, in a deep voice. As soon as I said it, I regretted it. The pain in my voice was faint, I can only hope he did not notice.

He did not answer, and I wondered if I had spoiled the atmosphere. His face was illegible as we drove into the school parking lot. I am late.

'Where is your family?' I asked - nice to be alone with him, but remember his car was usually full.

'They took Vivian's car.' He shrugged and parked next to a bright red convertible filled with gasoline. 'Show off, don't you?'

'Um, wow,' I panted. 'If he did, why would he ride with you?'

'Like I said, he was ostentatious. We tried to fit in.'

'You didn't.' I laughed and shivered as we went down Shaking my head. I am no longer late; his frantic driving gives me plenty of time to go to school. 'So, Vivian is more conspicuous today, so why drive?'

'Didn't you notice? I am breaking all the rules now.' He met me in front of the car and when we entered the campus, he walked up to me. I wanted to get a little closer and reach out to touch him, but I was afraid he would not like it.

'Why do you have such a car?' I was curious to know. 'Are you looking for privacy?'

'Indulgence,' he admitted with a mischievous smile. 'We all like to drive fast.'

'Numbers,' I whispered.

Under the shelter of the canteen roof, Charity-Anna was waiting, her eyes nearly bulging. On her arm, bless her, is my jacket.

'Hey, Charity-Anna,' I said when we were a few meters away. 'Thanks for remembering.' He handed me my jacket without saying a word.

'Good morning, Charity-Anna,' Melvin said politely. It was not her fault that her voice was so compelling. Or what his eyes can do.

'Uh... hi.' He stared at me with wide eyes, trying to clear up his confused thoughts. 'I think we'll see you at the Trig.' He gave me a meaningful look and I could not help but sigh. What will I tell you?

'Yes, see you then.'

He walked away, stopped twice, and looked back at us.

'What will you tell her?' Melvin murmured.

'Hey, I thought you couldn't read my mind!' I hissed.

'I can't,' he said surprised. Suddenly, a glimmer of illumination flashed in his eyes. 'I can read his, though, he'll be waiting for you to ambush you in the classroom.'

I moaned as I took off his jacket and handed it to him, putting mine on. He folded it over his arm.

'What will you tell her then?'

'A little help?' I pleaded with her. 'What do you want to know?'

He shook his head and smiled wickedly. 'It's not right.'

'No, you don't share what you know, it's not fair.'

He thought for a moment as we left. We stopped outside the door for our first lesson.

'He wants to know if we are secretly dating. He wants to know how you feel about me,' she finally said.

'Oops. What should I say?' I try to keep my face innocent. People passed us on our way to class, staring, but I barely noticed them.

'Hmm.' She stopped and grabbed a lock of hair, which escaped from the knot in my neck, and rolled it back into place. My heart was beating with excitement. 'I guess you can say yes to the first one ... if you don't mind, that's easier than any other explanation.'

'I don't mind,' I said softly.

'As for your other question... well, I'll hear the answer to that question myself.' The corner of his mouth twitched upward in my favorite jagged smile. I could not hold my breath fast enough to respond to this sentence. Turned.

'See you at lunch,' he called over his shoulder. The three who entered the door stopped and stared at me.

I rushed to class, blushing and irritated. He is such a liar. Now I am more concerned about what I will tell Charity-Anna. I sat in my usual seat and threw down my bag in a fit of rage.

'Good morning, Lily,' Buddy said from the seat next to me. I looked up to see the strange, almost resigned look on his face. 'How about Big Sur?'

'This is ...' There is no honest way to sum it up. 'Fantastic,' I concluded weakly. 'Charity-Anna has a very nice dress.'

'Did he say anything about Monday night?' he asked, his eyes lighting up. I smile at the turn of the conversation.

'She said she had a good time,' I assured him.

'He, did it?' he said enthusiastically.

'Surely.' Mr. Stackawitz then called the class and asked us to hand over our papers. The British and the government passed vaguely, and I worried about how to explain things to Charity-Anna, and I was distressed to know if Melvin would hear what I had to say through Anny's mind. What a drawback to his little talent, when

He did not save my life.



By the end of the second hour, the fog had almost dissolved, but it was still dark with low, oppressive clouds. I smile at the sky.

Melvin is right, of course. When I entered the Trig, Charity-Anna was sitting in the back, almost bouncing off the seat in excitement. I reluctantly approached her and sat down, trying to convince myself that it would be better to get it over with soon.

'Tell me everything!' he ordered before I sat down.

'What do you want to know?' I argued.

'What happened last night?'

'He offered me dinner and drove me home.'

He glared at me, his expression stiff and suspicious. 'How did you get home so early?'

'He drives like crazy. It is awful.' I hope you heard that.

'It's like a date - did you ask him to meet you there?'

I did not think about it. 'No ... I was surprised to see him there.'

His lips pursed in disappointment at the transparent honesty in my voice.

'But did he come to pick you up from school today?' He probed.

'Yes, that was a surprise too. He noticed I was not wearing a jacket last night,' I explained.

'So, are you going out again?'

'He offered to drive me to Altoona on Saturday because he didn't think the toy car would work, does it count?'

'Yup.' She nodded.

'Well, then yes.'

~\*~

'Wow.' He exaggerated the word in three syllables. 'Melvin Shezor.'

'I know,' I agreed. 'Wow' does not even cover it.

'Wait up!' His hands flew up, palms towards me as if he were blocking traffic. 'Did he kiss you?'

'No,' I murmured. 'Not like that.'

She looked disappointed. I am sure I did too.

'Do you think Saturday ...?' She raised her eyebrows.

'I'm really skeptical.' The disapproval in my voice was hard to hide.

'What did you talk about?' he whispered for more information. The class had begun, but Mr. DeVolcano was not paying much attention and we were not the only ones talking yet.

'I don't know, Annyie, a lot of things,' I whispered. 'We talked a little about English composition.' Extraordinarily little. He mentioned it in passing.

'Please, Lily,' he begged. 'Give me some details.'

'Er... well, I have one. You should see the server flirting with him - that is too much. But he does not pay her any attention.' Let him do his best.

'This is a good sign,' he nodded. 'Is it cute?'

'A lot ... and maybe nineteen or twenty.'

'Better. He likes you.'

'I think so, but it is hard to say. It has always been so mysterious,' I said to his interested and invested, and he sighed.

'I don't know how brave you are to be alone with him,' she whispered.

'Because?' I was shocked, but he did not understand my reaction.

'It is so... scary. I do not know what to tell him.' She grimaced, remembering this morning or last night when he turned his overwhelming gaze on her.

'I had some inconsistency issues when I was with him,' I admit.

'Oh, well. He is incredibly handsome.' Charity-Anna shrugged as if to justify any flaws. Which, in his book, it was.

'For him, there's more.'

'Really? Like what?'

I wish I had let go. Like I wish he were joking and listening.

'I can't explain it well ... but his face is even more incredible.' A vampire who wants to be a good guy - running around saving people's lives for not being a monster ... I stared at the front of the room.

'Is it possible?' he chuckled.

I ignored her, trying to pretend I was paying attention to Mr. DeVolcano .

'So, you like him?' He had no intention of giving up.

'Yes,' I said briefly.

'I mean, do you really like it?' He pressed.

'Yes,' I said again, blushing. I hope this detail does not come to your mind.

He has had enough monosyllabic answers. 'How much do you like it?'

'Too much,' I whispered. 'I like myself better than him. But I do not know how I can help you.' I sighed; one blush mixed with the other.

Then, thankfully, Mr. DeVolcano called Charity-Anna for answers.

She did not have a chance to start talking about it again in class, and as soon as the bell rang, I avoided it.

'In English, Buddy asked me if you mentioned Monday night,' I told her.

'Are you kidding! What did you say ?!' she gasped, completely lost.

'I told him you said you had a good time - he seemed happy.'

'Tell me what exactly he said and your correct answer!'

We spent the rest of the walk analyzing the sentence structure and most of it In Spanish, a brief description of Buddy's facial expressions. If I were not worried about the subject coming back to mind, I could not help but draw it.

Then the lunch bell rang. Charity-Anna must have been caught off guard by my excited look as I jumped out of my seat and shoved the book into my bag.

'You weren't with us today, were you?' He guessed.

'I do not believe.' I am not sure it will disappear again.

But outside our Spanish class, leaning against the wall - the Greek god who seemed more authorized than anyone else - Melvin was waiting for me. Charity-Anna glanced, rolled her eyes, and walked away.

'See you later, Lily.' His voice was reserved. I may need to turn off the ringer on my phone.

'Hello.' His voice was amused and exasperated. He is listening, of course.

'Hello.'

I could not think of anything else to say, and he was not talking - waiting for his hour I guess - so the walk to the cafeteria was peaceful. Walking into a busy lunch hour with Melvin was like my first day here. Everyone's eyes widened.

He made his way up the line, still not speaking, though his eyes returned to my face every few seconds, their speculative expressions. Anger prevailed over entertainment and became the dominant emotion on her face. I nervously pulled the zipper off my jacket.

He went to the counter and filled a tray with food.

'What are you doing?' I objected. 'Didn't you take all this from me?'

He shook his head and went shopping.

'Sure, half of it is for me.'

I raised my eyebrows.

It led the way to the same place we sat before. At the other end of the long table, we sat face to face with a group of elders who looked at us in amazement. Melvin seemed unaware.

'Take what you want,' he said, pushing the tray towards me.

'I'm curious,' I said, taking an apple and turning it in my hand.

'What would you do if someone dared you to eat?'

'You are always curious.' He grimaced, shaking his head. He stared at me, stared me in the eye, picked up the slice of pizza from the tray, took a deliberate bite, chewed it quickly, and swallowed it. I looked, and my eyes went wide.

'If someone dares to make you eat dirt, you can, can't you?' he asked condescendingly.

I wrinkled my nose. 'I did it once ... bold,' I admit. 'It's not that bad.'

He smiled. 'I don't think I'm surprised.' Something on my shoulder seemed to catch his attention.

'Charity-Anna is analyzing everything I've done - she'll break it down for you later.' He pushed the rest of the pizza towards me. At the mention of Charity-Anna, there was a hint of exasperation on her face.



I put down the apple, ate the pizza, and looked away knowing it was about to start.

'So- o the waitress is nice, isn't she?' he asked casually.

'You really haven't noticed?'

'No. I did not. I was thinking a lot.'

'Poor girl.' I can be generous now.

'What you said to Charity-Anna ... well, it bothers me.' He refused to be distracted. His voice was hoarse, and he looked up from under his lashes, his eyes full of doubt.

'I am not surprised you hear something you do not like. You know what they say about eavesdroppers,' I reminded him.

'I warned you and I would have listened to you.'

'And- I warned you, you don't want to know what I was thinking.'

'You did,' he agreed, always rude. 'You're not right, though. I want to know what you are thinking, everything. I just hope you are not thinking about something.'

I frowned. 'This is a big difference.'

'But that's not the point right now.'

'What is that?' Now we bend toward each other on the other side of the table. His large hands were folded under his chin; I leaned forward and wrapped my right hand around my neck. I had to remind myself that we were in a busy restaurant and had a lot of curious eyes watching us. It is all too easy to be surrounded by our own little private nerve bubbles.

'Do you really think you care more about me than I care about you?' he murmured, leaning beside me as he spoke, his deep golden eyes piercing.

I try to remember how to look. I had to look away before it came back to me.

'You're here again,' I murmured.

He opened his eyes in surprise. 'Thing?'

'It dazzles me,' I admit, trying to concentrate as I look back.

'Oh.' He frowned.

'It's not your fault,' I sighed. 'You cannot.'

'Answer this question?'

I looked down. 'Yup.'

'Yes, will you answer me, or yes, do you really think so?' He was exasperated again.

'Yes, I really think so.' My eyes stayed on the table; my eyes followed the faux wood pattern printed on the laminate. The silence continued. This time I stubbornly refused to be the first to break it, struggling to resist the temptation to peek into his expression.

Finally, he spoke, his voice soft as velvet. 'You are wrong.'

I looked up, her eyes were exceedingly kind.

'You wouldn't know,' I objected in a deep voice. I shook my head suspiciously, even though my heart pounded at his words, I desperately wanted to believe it.

'What made you think that?' Her crystalline citrine eyes... I thought, in a vain attempt to erase the truth from my mind.

I turned my head, ignoring his face, trying to understand it, trying to find a way to explain it. I saw him get impatient when I was looking for words. Frustrated by my silence, he began to frown. I raised my hand from my neck and reached out with a finger.

'Let me think about it,' I insisted. Now that he was satisfied that I was about to answer him, his expression became clear. I put my hands on the table and move my left hand so that the palms of the hands are close together. I stared at my hands, twisted, and released my fingers, and finally spoke.

'Well, aside from the obvious, sometimes ...' I hesitated. 'I cannot be sure - I cannot read minds - but sometimes when you say something else it seems like you are trying to say goodbye. That is the best way, to sum up, to sum up, the pain his words sometimes cause in me. Feel.

'Insightful,' he whispered. When he confirmed my fears, the pain returned.' That is why you are wrong,' he began to explain, but then his eyes narrowed.' What do you mean 'obvious? '

'Okay, look at me,' I said, as he was already staring at him. Look at yourself. 'I greeted him and his dazzling perfection.

His brow furrowed angrily for a moment, then flattened again, with a knowing look in his eye.' You cannot see yourself; you know. I admit you are obsessed with sad things,' he smiled darkly,' but you have not heard what all the boys in this school thought. Your first day.'

Ah, eyelids, dazed.' I do not think... 'I muttered to myself.

'Trust me once, you are the opposite of the average person.'

When he said that, my embarrassment was much stronger than seeing the joy in his eyes. I at once reminded him of my original argument.

'But I won't say goodbye,' I pointed out.

'Don't you understand? This proves me right. I care more because if I can do it ' - he shook his head as if he was struggling with the thought - ' If leaving was the right thing to do, then I would do it to not hurt you, to keep you safe, I will of evil.

'Don't you think I would?'

'You never have to make a choice.'

Suddenly, his inexplicable mood changed again. A sly and devastating smile rearranged his features. 'Of course, keeping you safe is starting to feel like a full- time job that requires my constant presence.

And get rid of me today, 'I reminded him, thanks for the lighthearted topic. I do not want to say hello to you again. If I had to, I guess I might put myself at risk on purpose to keep him close ... I

dismissed the thought before his swift eyes read my face. This idea will surely get me in trouble.

'Anyway,' he added.

'Anyway,' I agreed. I would have argued, but now I hope disaster is expected.

'I have another question for you.' His expression was still nonchalant.

'Shooting.'

'Do you really need to go to Altoona this Saturday, or is this just an excuse not to say no to all your fans?'

I made a face at the memory. 'You know, I haven't forgiven you for Tyler,' I warned him. 'It's your fault he's fooling himself into thinking I'm going to prom with him.'

'Oh, if it were not for me, he would ask if could ... I just wanted to see your face,' he laughed, I would be even more annoyed if his laugh wasn't so charming. 'If I asked you, would you refuse me?' 'Asked, still talking to himself.

'Probably not,' I admitted. 'But I'll cancel later - pretend to be sick or twist your ankle.'

He was baffled. 'Why do that?'

I shook my head sadly. 'I guess you've never seen me in the gym, but I thought you would understand.'

'You mean the fact that you cannot walk on a flat, stable surface without finding something to stumble upon a problem. 'He was very confident.' He is leading it all.' He saw I was about to protest and cut me off. 'But you never told me did you decided to go to Altoona, or do you mind if we do something different?'

If the 'we' part is there, I do not care.

'I'm open to alternatives,' I concede. 'But I have something to ask.'

He seemed cautious, as he always does when I ask an open question. 'What?'

'Can I drive?'

He frowned. 'Why?'

'Well, mostly because when I told Charlie I was going to Altoona, he specifically asked me if I was going alone when I was doing it. I would not lie if he asked me again, but I do not think he will ask again, leaving my car at home raises the subject unnecessarily. Also, why are you driving me scared?

Roll your eyes. 'Of all the things I might scare you, you worry I will drive. He shook his head in disgust, but then his eyes turned serious.' Don't you want to tell your father you want to spend the day with me?' His question that I do not understand.

'For Charlie, less is more.' I am sure. 'Anyway, where are we going?' 'The weather will be fine, so I'll stay out of the public eye ...you can stay with me if you want.' 'Once again, he left the choice to me.

' Do you want to tell me what you mean, about the sun? 'I asked, excited by the idea of revealing another stranger.'

Yes. 'He smiled, then stopped.' But if you do not want to. ... be alone with me, I would rather you did not go to Altoona alone. 'I shudder at the thought of the trouble you can find in such a big city.'



I am pissed. 'Phoenix is three times the size of Altoona - just in terms of population. In terms of size.' Then he closes, 'his eyes made that unfair smoke again.

I cannot argue with the look or the reason, it is a moot point anyway. 'As it happens, I don't mind being alone with you.' '

I know,' he sighed thoughtfully. 'You should tell Charlie, though.'

Why should I do that? "Give me a little encouragement to get you back.'

I swallowed. But, after a moment of reflection, I was sure. 'I think I'll take my chances.'

He sighed angrily and looked away.

Let us talk about something else, 'I suggested.

'What do you mean? 'He asked. He was still angry.

I looked around to make sure I was not being heard by anyone. As I looked around the room, I saw that his sister Naddalin Natalie was staring at me. Everyone else was looking at Melvin. Away, walking back to him and asking the first thing that came to my mind...

'Why did you go to that place in Goat Rock last weekend... hunting?' Charlie said that. it was not a good place to hike because of the bears. '

He stared at me as if I were missing something obvious.

'Bear?' 'I gasped and he smiled.' Bears are not in season, you know, 'I added sternly to hide my shock.

'If you read carefully, the law is only about hunting with guns, 'he told me.' He looked and his face slowly sank

Bear? 'I repeated it loudly.

'Grizzlies are Dejen's favorite. ' His voice was still casual, but his eyes were scanning my reaction. I try to cheer myself up.

'Good,' I said, taking another bite of pizza as an excuse to bow my head. I chewed slowly, then took a sip of Coke without looking up.

'So,' I said after a while, finally seeing her now anxious look. 'What do you like best?'

He raised his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth curved down in disapproval. 'Mountain lion.'

'Ah,' I said politely, disinterested, looking for my drink again.

'Of course,' he said, in the same tone as mine, 'we must be careful not to damage the environment with a reckless hunt. We try to focus on areas where there are too many predators, if necessary. All right. There are always plenty of deer and moose here, and they will, but what is the fun?' He smiled playfully.

'Exactly where,' I whispered around another bite of pizza.

'Early spring is bear season. Dejen's favorite. They just came out of hibernation, so they are more irritable.' He smiled at a remembered joke.

'There's nothing funnier than an angry grizzly bear,' I nodded in agreement.

Then he grinned and shook his head. Please tell me what you think.

'I tried to figure it out, but I couldn't,' I admitted. 'How do you hunt bears without weapons?'

'Oh, we have the weapons.' He showed a short, menacing smile with bright teeth. I shivered before he exposed me. 'Just not the kind they had in mind when they wrote the hunting law. If you have ever seen a bear attack on TV, you should be able to imagine Dejen hunting.'

I could not stop the later shiver that went through my spine. I looked across the coffee shop to Emmet, thankful he was not looking in my direction. The thick band of muscle that wrapped around his arms and torso was now somehow more menacing.

Melvin followed my gaze and laughed. I stared at him uncomfortably.

'Do you like bears too?' I asked softly.

'More like a lion, or what they told me,' He said softly. 'Maybe our preferences are indicative.'

I try to smile. 'Maybe,' I repeated. But my mind was full of opposing images that I could not put together. 'Is it something I could, see?'

'Absolutely not!' His face was paler than usual, and his eyes suddenly burned with rage. I leaned back, dazed, though I will never admit it, horrified by his reaction. He leaned back too, his arms crossed over his chest. 'Um scary for me?' I asked when I would be able to control my voice again.

'If so, I'll take you out tonight,' he said shrilly. 'You need a healthy fear. There is nothing better for you than this.'

'Then why?' I insisted, trying to ignore his angry look.

He stared at me for a long time.

- And-

'Then Later,' he finally said. He stood up with a slight movement.' We will be late.'

I looked around and was surprised to see that he was right, the coffee shop was almost empty. When I was with him, the time and place were so vague that I completely forgot about both. I jumped up and took my bag from the back.

'After that,' I agreed.

## 12 Balance

I was invisible all my life. Invisible to children at school, to ordinary pedestrians on the street. This is the story of my disappearance. When I heard Melvin, the most popular boy in my class, call me 'baby' and wave at me, I was shocked, surprised, and frankly happy. For the first time in my life, I was not invisible. Let us just say 15 minutes of my fame did not last. Before long, someone knew or cared who I was. You are invisible again. The rest of that terrible year passed very slowly. It felt like a form of torture. And so, my second year ended, and my first year began. On the

first day of school, I put my new goal to the test, which was that no one would leave him, and I did not care what they thought of me. I entered the school with my head held high and, to my surprise, I gave birth to some children whom I had known all my life, and who miraculously remembered my name. Today it got even weirder because Melvin was talking to me right now. He had nothing better to do or this was a cruel joke when he struck up a conversation with me as I walked into my new locker for the year. I had no idea why, as I saw myself as an uninteresting and unpopular girl, but I was interested in Melvin. When I got to the closet, Melvin grabbed a pen and a sticky note and wrote his number, tearing the paper in half and asking me to do the same. I typed in my number, and he said thank you, and I left my life just as soon as he got there. Even though I had his number, I told myself I would not be the one texting the other person first.

So, I hid again for the rest of the year. It was a pain-free first year. I imagined seeing Melvin everywhere that summer, in the frozen food section of the supermarket, queuing at the local coffee shop, driving on his bike past my house every morning I ignored this one the cases are just fiction but at the beginning of the school year I felt like maybe I hadn't imagined seeing Melvin all the time like he might be there so I would

notice him and maybe he could say something to me Maybe, maybe I wasn't crazy in a way Melvin was the exception to the disappearance that plagued my first three years of high school the first day of the first year was fast approaching, and as the days went on I got more and more nervous I went to day school and put on my favorite clothes to calm my nerves It was a green shirt with braided belts and long jeans.

Enough to cover my ugly thighs because trust me they are ugly. When I went to school, I felt confident. I had my schedule and my locker number, so I walked to my first class.

Then at night, all the bad dreams, and the flames burned my skin as I swam in the sea of fire, it was like hell. I tried to find my family. I looked for a way out. I drowned in flames...

When I woke up the whole room was white. 'Is this heaven?' I almost wondered.

'No!' I laughed at someone I did not know was there at first but was not scared.

'What is funny?' She asked me to be angry. 'Nothing. It is funny when someone wakes up in the hospital, they always say, 'Am I in heaven?' They laughed again.

'Who are you?! And where is my father? Then I realized where I was and what had happened. I noticed that my arms were all bandaged

too. When I tried to feel my forehead, a stinging, stinging sensation came over my body. I did not want anyone to tell me what I already knew. The little flame of hope had already been extinguished. That.

'I am Dr. Melvin's father.' He said his expressions ranged from happiness and jest to darkness and sorrow. 'I knew it. And I also realized that this was my fault because I had just grown up and left my family to die. It is all my fault. I kept repeating it in my head until, I was sure. Then I burst into tears

That was 10 years ago My life has always been frustrating I did not have any friends or anyone to talk to At first I hated them but then I realized I had to get used to them so I or so later a fire broke out and both my uncle and aunt died I was burned alone and had to go to the hospital for three days so it wasn't much Not like my aunt and uncle died Was this kind of punishment Did I live to be punished?



At first, I thought so, but when I went to high school, I found the source of it. It has been my favorite since I was 14 years old. So now I live with her and her parents. It is not so bad that they treat me well and there has not yet been a fire, but

I saw how the hands moved round and round and almost hypnotized me. Tick, 'I cannot stand it anymore than that sound that pulls me in and takes me to another dimension...

Mr. Kingsburgh melted his ring, 'Oh dear. Everyone is listening.' Nobody paid attention and kept playing on I- pods, fidgeting with their trigonometry books, or staring at the clock. Mr. Kingsburgh cleared his throat again and then said in a slightly louder voice 'Klaas. Okay, I have important news.' Nobody noticed. I was still staring at the clock. Hypnotized by his voice.

'Tap, tack, tack, tack, tack...' Class! Listen!' cried Mr. Kingsburgh. I looked at him head- to- head. It took me a while to break out of the ecstasy, but Mr. Kingsburgh's voice helped me. I had never heard him scream so loud. When my face turned to floated above, I saw him His eyes were pale blue, his dirty blond hair The wizard, his muscular arms I dreamed away staring into his eyes and for a moment I thought I saw a glimpse of his eyes looking at me I did not. I do not believe it! But I

just imagined it. My mind was swirling with thoughts. Was he? Wasn't he? Was he? Look, it was not...

'This is Judas,' said Mr. Kingsburgh, his voice low. I stared at him. Then I looked around the class looking for a free seat, an impossible number. I thought the only extra seat was across the room. I could see the lucky person. He did not even see next to him. Here my happiness dropped again, making me feel empty and soulless. I sat there and felt my happiness sinking. It fell on my feet. I felt so far, abandoned, and gloomy... turned off the car and looked at Singer 'Is that something for you?' I spoke.

'Sure.' She replied with a big smile on her face.

'Okay, I have decided to bring you in. me here, because, you know, my mom was a musician, and I would like to come here and play for her sometimes. Usually at the end of the month, but in this, I came here today because it is the anniversary of her death.'

'When I was in fifth grade, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and I was on chemotherapy, which I stopped until the summer before my first year when I got it again 'But worse than before. Cancer

was more aggressive and surprised her, she lost her strength and eventually her fight.'

The singer sat there absorbing the information she had just been given and brought out Tiger for her, and Nadalyn was lying next to me, right over my mother's grave. 'She would love you,' I said softly as Singer looked at me, a glimmer. hope in her pretty brown eyes We got closer before our lips finally met That first kiss was one of the best things that ever happened to me, we kissed twice more before I grabbed my guitars and put them back in the car I went back to Singer, I took her hand, and she leaned in.

As we sat there together I somehow felt closer to my mother I knew one hundred percent that if she were still there today, she would have loved Singer I thought about what my mother looked like when I was younger and I am glad I could Know her at least fourteen years of my life The only thing that helped me live her death day in and day out, Anny was calculated photo of my mother when she was younger. The singer brought me back to reality by asking, 'Melvin, are you okay?'

After all this time, with my mom away, I have never lied when I said, 'Yeah, I'm fine.'

The singer turned and kissed me again. 'I have waited a long time for this. Thank you.'

I said to her, 'You're welcome,' and I accepted her in return. 'We have to start anyway.'

'Yes,' she said, 'my mother will wait for me to eat.'

'Fine,' I said holding her hand as we walked to the car. While I was driving, Singer told me about her mother, how her father left when she was little, and she did not remember him at all. I said, 'Wow, I can't imagine not knowing my father.'

'Yeah, like I never imagined my mom wouldn't be there for me.' We just sat there. I was silent until I entered her hallway. This time I thought I would finally accept it. I took off my seat belt and turned towards me. 'Thank you for showing me your mother's grave. I understand it was difficult for you and I am honored that you took me with you.'

I leaned over and kissed her before just saying, 'Welcome, singer.' She got out of the car and said goodbye, into the driveway and the house.

Driving away was not as hard as last time, and I came home with plenty of time for dinner. I went to my room after I got home and did

all my homework. It was around 606 PM when we ate my favorite lasagna. We ate and my father said to me, 'So how was your day?'

'It was great,' I said, trying to hide part of the smile I had.

'Will you tell us what happened?' he said, looking at Anny.

'Well, I kissed Singer and tomorrow I'm going to ask her to be my friend.' I spoke.

'Yes!' Anny said before my dad could get anything out of it.

'Now I will meet her.'

'Of course, princess,' said my father, 'and so am I.'

'Yeah, I thought you'd say that and eventually you'd meet her.'

'Don't break her heart now.' my father said.

I said, 'Okay, Dad.' After I washed the dishes, I went to the back porch and called Singer. We talked for so long that my phone's battery started to drain, so I had to say goodbye and goodnight. It was about 1050 PM when I cut the line with Singer, so I quietly climbed the stairs so as not to wake Anny and went to my room all night. I put my phone on the charger and put on some pajamas and at 1115 I almost passed out, exhausted from the day.

Before I fell asleep, however, I whispered, 'I love you, Mom.' And I swear I heard her whisper again, 'I love you too, honey.' The next morning, I woke up refreshed and reborn. I packed up all my things, got dressed, and had a cup of coffee to go. I got in the car and drove to school, got there with Singer sitting in front of the flagpole. I went to her, my heart out of control in my chest, and I smiled at her the way she smiled at me. I bent down to sit and as soon as I sat down, I kissed her and said, 'Good morning.'

'In reality.' She replied, somehow surprised that all this happened. I was also surprised. I did not know what would happen if I took her to the cemetery. But the plan went the way I wanted it to, and it is even better. We were studying for an English test after I got there, so the bell rang, and I held her hand as we went to class. I think holding hands is important to people because both girls and boys whispered in the hallway as we walked. My old friends looked at me in disgust, except my best friend Matt, who shook his head and smiled at me. I should talk to him after school and tell him what was going on.

We finally got to our English room, and I pressed Singer's hand before letting go and we both sat down. After attending the classes, the class started, and I was unable to talk to Singer for the rest of the

period. Our schedules split for the rest of the day until lunch, and I met Singer under our tree outside. She smiled when she saw me, and I smiled, and I was happy to see her.

I told her to bend over to sit down and kiss her on the cheek. I sat next to her on the floor, and we ate lunch and discussed our favorite things. Her favorite movie of all time was 'Paper Towns', and my movie was 'Fault in the Stars'. My favorite sport is Kickball, and her favorite book was Great and Terrible Beauty.

After drinking some more coffee, I laid my head on Melvin's shoulder and he was right there between his collarbone and neck. I felt safe and secure and never wanted to move again. clock! clock! clock! But unfortunately, at that moment, the bell rang (go to the number), and we went to English. There we learned all about Hamlet and started reading it and watching movies. After English, I went to study economics.

Then I went to some of my other classes and ended up having lunch with Melvin. I had my lunch, a bottle of water, an orange, and a slice of pizza. We got out of the cafeteria and went to our place by the tree. My (new) friend Andy and Melvin's friend Matt were waiting there. Melvin and Matt talked about things like cars or something. Andy and I talked about our relationships; Of course, I am with Melvin and her

boyfriend with our young friend Jake. We met over lunch and exchanged our new cell phone numbers so we could stay connected.

Andy hugged Melvin and I went to the last classroom of the class. If a student at our school has a classroom for his last class, he can leave the school earlier, if he checks out at the head office before leaving. We worked together on our homework, gathered our things together, went to our lockers, and then to the head office to check out. On the way home, we stopped for ice cream at Dairy Queen. After eating some ice cream, I was full and ready to take a nap. When we got to my house, I was shit. For over an hour and a half until my mother came home, Melvin and I took a nap. I set the alarm for an hour and we both fell asleep in each other's arms.

We must have slept through the alarm because two hours later we woke up rested, but I was worried that my mother would come home. I left a note on the counter that she had an appointment and did not want to wake us up. I was glad she had a date, but a little sad she did not wake me up. I would like to help her get ready. We were awake, better late than never. Melvin was already in the car, so I grabbed an extra blanket to keep warm with my bag. When we got to the beach the place was empty, the



lifeguards went. We found a nice spot by the lifeguard tower and put our blankets on the floor.

Melvin pulled out a bag containing a bag of chips and a bag of pastries. He also had a large thermos filled with fresh hot coffee. We each got a cup and started talking. We discussed things like our pets and childhood best friends and important things like losing parents and war. We talked about music, books, movies, and everything under the sun. I shared more things with Melvin at the time than I told my mother or even Andy. Sometimes our relationship overwhelmed me, but in the end, I felt like I was with the right person. As the sky began to change color, I returned to Melvin's chest. Again, I felt safe and secure in that perfect moment. The sunset was amazing. There were shimmering shades of pink, shades of red and yellow, and hints of blue and orange. We sat there quietly, thinking, and looking at the sky. I fell asleep about 10 or 15 minutes after sunset, so Melvin picked me up and carried me to the car. He packed the rest of our things and put them back in the car and drove to my house.

When I woke up, I stretched and yawned, finding out where I was. Melvin was still snoring softly, so I got up carefully, grabbed the skirt of my dress (which I slept in), and went upstairs.

I went to my room and took off my dress and put on my pajama bottoms and shirt. I went back downstairs and gently pushed Melvin until he slowly woke up. He was groggy when he woke up, but his hair was all full and he looked at me with a friendly smile. I thought I had the best friend ever.

I do not think he knew where he was for another few seconds until I told him, 'We both slept on the couch.' He nodded, smiled, and asked, 'What kind of breakfast?' I laughed and told him we should go out. He liked the idea and said, 'Wow. I just need to go home and change my clothes first.'

When I returned home, I went upstairs to change and then went downstairs to wait for him. He picked me up after about 10 minutes and we drove to the small restaurant in town. We sat there and ate, talking about the wonderful time we had at the ball. I was glad he was having fun and glad he was the one he chose. After breakfast, we had no idea where to go, but neither of us wanted to go home. We finally decided to hang out in the yard near our homes.

As Melvin pulled the car into the parking lot, I saw a familiar car. It took me a few seconds to figure out why I recognized it, but then it turned out to be my mom's car. Several thoughts came to my mind Why is

my mother here? What does she do? Who is she with? When I came back to reality, I saw my mother holding a man's hand on the hammock. At first, it was weird because my mother was holding a man's hand, but then I was angry because I did not know who he was. I started back to my mother, and I said 'Mom?' At the same time, Melvin said 'Daddy'?

We both looked at each other unbelievably. Our parents were... dating? This was not possible. it cannot be. My mother had then dropped the man's hand and stood up to say something. I was not ready to hear what she was going to say, so I took Melvin's hand and walked back to his car. He sat in the driver's seat and, without asking where he was going, began to his safe place, the cemetery. We drove to the cemetery; Melvin parked the car at the entrance, and we got out. We walked side by side, hand in hand, silently. I suppose we thought the same... our parents' secret romance. I was still so shocked that I could not even answer when Melvin reached out my hand and beckoned me to sit with him. I sat next to him, as close to him as I could without sitting on him and put my head under his chin, which made me feel very safe. I just wanted to stay there while Melvin held me forever. I did not want to face the fact that our parents were dating. I went back to my fantasy world for a while, but I went back to reality when Melvin told me the time.

'It's 1255 PM.' He spoke. I thought oh shit my curfew is 1 tonight; I must go home soon. I mentioned this to Melvin, and we hurried back to the car. He drove me home at the usual speed and it was 100 am when I walked through the front door of my house. I could not tell if my mom was home yet, and it was not because there was no light on, and I could not hear the TV. I went up the stairs and was shocked that I was back home and had been able to stay out of the house. I went to sleep and brushed my teeth but woke up strangely.

'Pap- Titus!' Charlie called as soon as he got out of the car.

As I walked down the porch, I turned to the house and nodded to Chiaz. I heard Charlie greet me loudly behind me.

'I'll pretend I didn't see you driving, Jack,' he said disapprovingly.

'We got our passes early in Reese,' Chiaz said, and I locked the door and turned on the porch light.

Charlie laughed, 'Of course.'

'I have to move somehow.' I easily recognized Mr. Black 's booming voice, despite the years. His voice suddenly made me feel like a child.

I went in, left the door open behind me, turned on the light, and hung up my jacket. Then I stood in the doorway watching anxiously as Charlie and Chiaz helped Mr. out of the car and into his wheelchair.

I got out of the way as the three rushed in to wipe the rain.

'It was a surprise,' Charlie said.

'It's been a long time,' Mr. Black replied. 'I hope it's not a bad time.' His dark eyes came back to me, their expressions unrecognizable.

'No, that is great. I want you to keep playing.'

Chiaz smiled. 'That was the plan - our TV was off last week.'

Mr. Black drew a face for his son. 'Of course, Chiaz is looking forward to seeing Lily again,' he added. Chiaz frowned and bowed his head, and I resisted a burst of remorse. You are too camouflaged at the beach.

'Are you hungry?' I asked, turning to the kitchen. I wanted to avoid Mr. Black's gaze.

'Now we ate before we came,' Chiaz replied.

'What about you, Charlie?' She shouted over my shoulder as I ran around the corner.

'Of course,' he replied, his voice moving in the direction of the living room and the TV. I could hear Mr. Black 's chair following Back.

The grilled cheese sandwich was in the pan, and I was slicing tomatoes when someone was behind me.

'How does this work?' asked Chiaz.

'Very well.' I laughed. It was hard to resist his enthusiasm.'  
And you? Is your car done?

'Number.' Absolute value. 'I still need spare parts, which we borrowed.' He pointed his thumb in the direction of the front yard.

'Sorry. Did not see anything...what are you looking for?'

'Master Tank'. He laughed. What is wrong with the car?  
Suddenly added.

'Numbers.'

'Oh, I just wanted to know, because you didn't drive.'

I stared at the plate, pulling the edges of the sandwich to check the underside. 'I got a ride with a friend.'

'A nice trip.' Chiaz's voice was full of admiration. 'But I do not know the driver. I thought I knew most of the kids here.'

I nodded noncommittally, closing my eyes as I rolled over my sandwich.

'Looks like my dad knows him from somewhere.'

'Chiaz, can you get me some dishes?' It was in the cupboard above the sink.

'Definitely.'

He took the plate silently. I hope he will abandon her now.

'Who is that?' He asked, placing two plates on the table next to me.

I sighed in failure. Melvin Shezor.

To my surprise, he smiled. I have seen it. It looks a little awkward.

'That explains it,' he said. 'I wonder why my father is behaving so strangely.'

'That's real.' I pretended to be innocent. 'He doesn't like the Shezor.'

'Superstitious old man,' Chiaz murmured.

'Don't you think he's going to say something to Charlie?' I could not help but ask, speaking slowly.

Chiaz stared at me for a moment, and I could not see the expression in his dark eyes. Finally, he replied 'I doubt it. 'Charlie chewed it well last time. They have not spoken much since - I guess tonight is a reunion, I think. I do not think he is going to talk about it anymore.'

I said, trying to sound indifferent.

After bringing the food to Charlie, I stayed in the front room and pretended to be watching the game and Chiaz was talking to me. I was really listening to the men talking and keeping an eye out for Mr. Black to tease me. Any sign and find a way to stop him when he starts.

The night is long. I have a lot of homework to do, but I am afraid to leave Mr. Black alone with Charlie. Finally, game over.

'You and your friends soon Are you going back to the beach?

'Chiaz asked to push his father over the threshold.

'I'm not sure,' I said.

'It's fun, Charlie,' Mr. B.

Charlie encouraged, 'Come to the next game.'



'Of course, of course,' Bailey said. 'We'll be there.' Good night. Her eyes turned to mine, and her smile disappeared. 'Be careful, Lily,' he added solemnly.

'Thanks,' I muttered, looking away.

When Charlie beckoned me from the door, I walked up the stairs.

'Wait, Lily,' he said.

I gritted my teeth. Did Mr. Black have anything before I joined the living room?

But Charlie was relieved, still smiling at the unexpected visit.

'Tonight, I did not get a chance to speak to you. How are you today?

'Okay.' I hesitated for the first step, looking for details that I could safely share. 'My badminton team won all four games.'

'Wow, I didn't know you could play badminton.'

'Well, actually, I can't, but my partner is really good,' she admitted.

'Who is this?' he asked with interest.

'Uh... Buddy Newton,' I told him reluctantly.

'Oh yes, you said you and Newton's son were friends.' I paid.

'Wonderful family.' Meditate for a minute. 'Why didn't you ask her to dance this weekend?'

'Dad!' moaned. 'He's dating my friend Charity-Anna. And, you know I cannot dance.'

'Oh, yes,' he murmured. Then he smiled apologetically at me. 'So, it is good for you to go on Saturday...I was going to go fishing with the guys at the station. It should be hot. But if you want to delay your trip so I can get someone.' Go with you, I will stay at home. I know I am leaving you here. So lonely.

'Dad, you're doing great.' I smiled, hoping it would not be a relief. 'I did not. I never thought I would be alone - I love you so much.' I winked at her, and she squinted and smiled.

I slept better that night and was too tired to dream anymore. When I woke up to the light grey morning, I was in a good mood. The tense night with Mr. Black and Chiaz seemed innocuous now; I decided to forget about it entirely. I found myself hissing as I pulled my forehead hair

into the bobby pins, then came back as I jumped down the stairs. Note Charlie.

'You had a great time this morning,' he said of the little boy's lunch.

I shook my head. 'It's Friday.'

I ran for Charlie, second from the left. My bag was ready, my shoes and teeth were brushed, but even though I rushed out the door as soon as I was sure Charlie was out of sight, Melvin was faster. He waited in the gleaming car, the windows closed and the engine off.

This time I did not hesitate because I got into the co-pilot sooner, the sooner I saw his face. He smiled at me and stopped my breathing and my heart. I cannot imagine how angels could be wiser. He has nothing to improve.

'How did you grow up?' asked. I wonder if he knows how wonderful her voice is.

'Particularly good. How was your evening?'

'Attractive.' His smile was funny. I feel like I am missing an inside joke.

'Can I ask what you did? I ask.

'Numbers. 'He smiled. 'It's still mine today.' '

He wanted to know more about people today to know more about him and his hobbies and the things we did together in our free time. Then the only grandmother I knew, a few friends of mine at school, when he I was embarrassed to ask me about a boy I had dated. I am relieved that this conversation could not last long since I have never dated anyone. He is as right as Charity-Anna, and Jeannette I am surprised by the lack of romance.

'So- o you never met the guy you wanted? he asked in a serious tone that left me wondering what he was thinking.

I am reluctantly honest. Not in Phoenix.

His lips were pressed into a hard line.

We were in the cafeteria. The day went by quickly, soon It became a routine. I took his short break to take a bite of bread.

'I should let you drive yourself today,' he said, a suggestion that came out of nowhere, and I chewed.

'Why? 'I am a student.

'I'm leaving with Naddalin Natalie after lunch.'

'Oh. I blinked, confused, and disappointed. 'Fortunately, it's not too far.'

He frowned impatiently. 'I will not take you home. 'We'll get your car and leave it to you.'

I do not have the keys,' she sighed. 'I don't really mind walking.' 'My thought was to waste my time with him.

Shaking my head. 'Your car will be here; the key will be in the ignition - unless you are worried someone might steal it. laughs at the idea.

'Okay,' I agreed with pursed lips. I am sure my keys were in the pocket of a pair of jeans I was wearing on Wednesday, under a pile of clothes in the laundry room. Even if he broke into my house, no matter what he did, he would never find her. He challenged my approval. He smiled, confident.

'Where are you going then?' I asked as casually as possible.

'Hunting,' he answered ignorantly. 'If I had to be alone with you tomorrow, I would take all possible precautions.' ' Staring at his face... pleading. 'You can cancel anytime, you know.' The power of her disguised

eyes and the power of his words. I refused to be persuaded to be afraid of him, no matter how real the danger was. It did not matter, I repeated myself in my mind.

'No,' she whispered, looking into his face. 'I cannot print.  
'Maybe you're right,' he whispered sadly. I watched his eyes darken.

I changed the subject. 'What time will I see you tomorrow?' I asked, already frustrated that he was leaving now.

'It depends... it's Saturday, don't you want to sleep?' 'Wonder.'

'No,' I replied quickly. Preventing a smile.

'So, as usual,' he decided. 'Will Charlie be there?'

No, he is hunting tomorrow.' She smiled recalling that everything went well.

His voice became harsh. 'What will he think if you don't come home?'

I replied coldly 'I do not know. 'He knew I was going to do the laundry. He thought I had fallen into the washing machine. I frowned. His anger was stronger than mine.

'What are you chasing tonight?' I asked when I was sure I had lost this dazzling game.

'Everything we found was in the garden. We will not leave.

'He seemed disturbed by my flippant mention of his secret truth.

'Why are you going with Naddalin Natalie?' I wonder.

'Isn't she the most... supportive.' he said, frowning.

'What about the others?' I asked shyly. 'What are these?'

He frowned slightly. 'Mostly, suspicious.'

I took a quick glance at his family behind me. They were sitting, looking in different directions, like the first time I saw them. Only now they are four years old. Their bronze- haired brother- in- law sat in front of me, Golden eyes full of doubts.

I guess 'They don't like me.'

That is not all,' he disagreed, but his eyes were innocent. 'They don't understand why I can't leave you alone.'

Neither did I.' Then I looked up at the ceiling and met my eyes again. 'I told you cannot see yourself at all. You are not like anyone I have known before. You fascinate me.'

I looked at him, making sure he was joking now.

He smiled when he read my expression. 'I have my advantage,' he whispered, rubbing his forehead cautiously, 'My understanding of human nature is above average. People can expect. But you...you were never what I expected. You always surprise me.'

I looked away and looked back at his family, embarrassed and disgruntled. His words made me feel like I was doing a science experiment. I wanted to laugh at myself because I did not think of anything else.

'Parts are easy to explain,' he continued. I can feel his eyes on my face, but I cannot look at him yet for fear that he will read the sadness in my eyes...and it is hard to describe in words...'

I still stare at the Karen family as he speaks. Suddenly Vivian, his blond beauty, beautiful sister, turned to me. No, do not look - shining, dark, cold eyes. I wanted to look away, but she kept her eyes on me until Melvin cut him off, his beard making an angry noise. Almost hissing.

Vivian turned her head and felt relieved. I looked at Melvin - I knew he could see the confusion and fear in my wide eyes.



When explaining, his face was tight. 'I am sorry. She is just worried. You see...it is more dangerous to me than spending so much time with you in public...' He lowered his head.

'What if?'

'If it's over... bad.' He buried his head in his hands, like he had been in Big Sur that night. His pain was obvious. I long for his comfort, but I do not know what to do. I stretched my hand out to him. Still, I quickly dropped it on the table, worried that my touch would only make things worse. I slowly realized that his words must have frightened me, and I waited for that fear to come, but it felt like everything was a sting of his pain.

And frustration - frustration because Vivian interrupted everything he was going to say. I do not know how to put it back together. His head is still in his hands.

I try to speak in a normal voice. 'Then you have to go now?'

'Yes.' He raised his face. Serious for a while, then his mood changed, and he smiled. 'They still have 15 minutes of tragic movies to endure in terms of biology - I don't think I can take it anymore.'

I have started. Naddalin Natalie, with short jet-black hair and a tangled mess around her beautiful fairy face, stood suddenly behind his shoulders. Even in absolute stillness, her slender figure remained slender and graceful.

He greeted her without taking his eyes off me. 'Naddalin Natalie.'

'Melvin,' she replied, her soprano voice as beautiful as hers.

'Naddalin Natalie, Lily- Lily, Naddalin Natalie,' he waved to us with a wry smile.

Hello Lily. His bright, shining eyes were hard to make out, but his smile was friendly. 'It's good to finally see you.'

Melvin gave her a gloomy look.

'Hello, Naddalin Natalie,' she muttered shyly.

'Are you ready?' She asked him.

His voice is isolated. 'There pick you up in the car.'

I left without saying a word. Her gait was so gentle and so bumpy that I felt a pang of jealousy.

Should I say 'enjoy' or are these bad feelings? I asked him and I went back to find him.

'No, the 'fun' function is the same as any other function.' He smiled.

'Enjoy.' I tried to be sincere. Of course, I did not deceive him. Please try to stay safe.'

'Forex security - what a challenge.'

It is a challenge for you. 'His jaw tightened.' Counting.'

I promise to try.' To be safe,' she read.

'I'll do my best.'

Then he stood up, and so did I. I sighed, 'See you tomorrow. I nodded. With a somber head.

He assured her, smiling crookedly, 'I'll be there tomorrow morning.' 'He touched my face across the table and brushed my cheekbones lightly. Then he turned and walked away. I looked behind him until he was gone.

I wanted to give up the rest of the day, at least in the gym, but my warning instincts stopped me. I know if I disappear now, Buddy and

others will think I am with Melvin. Melvin worries about the time we spend in public...if things go wrong, I refuse to type in the last thought of a million years and instead let me focus. Make things safer.

I know intuitively - and I feel him too - that tomorrow will be critical. Our relationship cannot go on Balance, like I have been on the edge. We will be on one side or the other, based entirely on his decision or his gut feeling. My decision was made before my conscious choice, and I was determined to see her. Because to me there is nothing scarier and sadder than the thought of leaving him. It is impossible.

I go to class and feel obligated. I cannot honestly say what is going on in biology. My brain was engrossed in my thoughts of tomorrow. At the gym, Buddy was talking to me again. I had a wonderful time in Altoona. I explained carefully that I canceled my flight and worried about my 0.

'You're going to the prom with Colin?' he asked suddenly sullenly.

'No, I'm not going to the dance at all.'

'Then what are you doing?' he asked with interest.

My natural impulse was to tell him to back off. Instead, she blatantly lied.

'Do the laundry and then I have to study for the Trig test, or I'll fail.' 'Did Colin help you with your studies?' 'Melvin won't help me with my studies,'

She claimed. He went somewhere on the weekend. 'The lie was more natural than usual, I noticed with surprise.

'Oh. I paid. 'You know, you can dance with our band anyway, and that would be cool. We will all dance with you,' he promised.

The image on Charity-Anna's face made my tone too high.

'I'm not going to the dance, Buddy, okay?'

'Okay. 'No sullener. 'I am just showing. 'The school days are finally over, and I walk into the parking lot absentmindedly. I do not particularly want to go home, but I do not know how he is going to get my car back. Again, I am starting to believe that nothing is for him. Impossible. The last intuition proved correct - my car was parked in the same spot where I parked my Volvo this morning. I shook my head in disappointment when I opened the door and saw the key for the ignition.

My seat There was a folded white sheet of paper on it. I walked in and closed the door before I could open it. Two words were written in the elegant text.

Beware.

The sound of trucks crashing in my life scared me. I laughed alone.

When I came back, the doorknob was locked, and the latch was open because I left it this morning. Inside, I went straight to the laundry. It was as if I had left him too. I looked for myself and I checked my pockets when I found them. Empty. I hung up my keys, I thought, shaking my head.

Out of the same instinct I lied to Buddy, I called Charity-Anna under the pretext of good luck dancing to her. When I made the same wish as Melvin, I told him about the cancellation. Extremely disappointed for a third- party monitor. I said goodbye soon after that.

Charlie missed dinner, as I expected, worried about something at work, or a basketball game, or he really liked lasagna - it was hard to tell Charlie.

'You know, Dad...' I began to enter his dreams.

'What's the matter, Bill?' 'You are right about Altoona. I think I will wait until Charity-Anna or someone else can come with me.'

Oh,' he said surprised. 'Well then.' So, you want me to stay home?

'No, Dad, do not change your plans. I have a million things to do...homework, laundry...I must go to the library and the grocery store. I am in and out today Come out. Today...go and enjoy.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sure, Dad. Also, the number of fish in the fridge has been reduced and our stock is down to two or three years, three.'

'Are you sure it's easy to live with Lily?' Smiled.

'I could say the same to you,' I said with a smile. My laughter was gone, but he did not seem to notice. I felt so guilty about cheating on him that I almost asked Melvin for advice and told him where I was going about.

After dinner, I put my clothes in the dryer. Unfortunately, it is a hands-on job. My brain has a lot of free time, and it is spinning out of control. I vacillated between an anticipation so strong that it was almost painful and a cunning fear that pierced my resolve. I must keep reminding

myself that I have decided and that I am not going back. I took his notes too far out of my pocket to absorb the two little notes he wrote. I told myself over and over that he wanted me to be safe. I will only hold on to the belief that this desire will eventually triumph over others. What is my other choice - cut him out of my life? unbearable. And, since I came to Forex, my life seems to revolve around it.

But a little voice in the back of my head is anxious, wondering if this will hurt me...if it ends badly.

I was only relieved when I accepted that bedtime was late. I knew I was too nervous to sleep, so I did things I had never done before. I deliberately took unnecessary cold medicine - the kind that kept me outside for eight hours. I do not usually tolerate this behavior myself, but tomorrow it is going to get complicated enough without my sleep deprivation being overpowering.

The roar of the car scared me. I laughed to myself.

When I got home the door handle was locked, the bolt was unlocked, I just walked out the door this morning. Inside, I went straight to the laundry room. It is like I left him. I dug into my jeans and checked the



pockets after finding them. There is no content. Shaking my head, I might put my key away.

Following the same instinct that made me lie to Buddy, I called Charity-Anna pretending to wish her luck at the dance. When he suggested the same wish for Melvin and the day, I told him about the cancellation. He was more disappointed than a third- party observer. After that I quickly said goodbye.

Charlie was busy at lunch, worried about something at work, I am guessing, it was the basketball game, or he was just enjoying his lasagna - hard to tell with Charlie.

'You know, father...' I began, drifting off into his dream

'What is it, Lill?'

'You are right about Altoona. I thought I would wait until Charity-Anna or someone else came with me.'

'Oh,' he said, surprised. 'Well, good. Well, you want me to stay home?'

'No, Dad, do not change your plans. I have a million things to do... homework, laundry... I must go to the library and the grocery store. I am in and out of them all. day ... have fun.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, then father Besides, the fish in the freezer is getting dangerous- we've been two, maybe three years.'

You are so easy to live with, Lily.' She smiled.

No. I felt so guilty for cheating. I almost took Melvin's advice and told her where I was. Almost.

After dinner, I folded the laundry and put another load through the dryer. Unfortunately, it is the kind of thing that just keeps the hands. that I have too much free time in my mind, and it is out of control. I am so strong in anticipation that it almost hurts, and a subtle fear that shows my determination. I had to remind myself that I made a choice, and I did not take it back. Those two he wrote me I pulled his letter out of my pocket more often than I had to swallow the little word. He wanted me to be safe, I told myself repeatedly. I just end up sharing that wish with others. I believe it can be bought. So, what is my other choice - to cut him out of my life? Unbearable. Besides, since coming to McAuley, my life has been about him.

But a little voice in my head worries, will it hurt so much... if it ends?

I was relieved when it was too late to be admitted to bed. I knew I was too stressed to sleep, so I did something I had never done before. I took unnecessary cold medicine on purpose - I was knocked out for eight hours. I do not usually condone this kind of behavior myself, but tomorrow will be complicated without fearing my lack of sleep more than anything else. While I waited for the meds to kick in, I dried my clean hair until it was straight and thought about what I was going to wear tomorrow. Everything was ready for the morning, I finally slept. I feel hyper; I could not help but twitch. I got up and flipped through the CDs in my shoebox until I found a collection of Chopin's nocturnes. I put it on very quietly and then lay down again, concentrating on relaxing each part of my body. Somewhere in the middle of that workout the chill pills started kicking in and I happily passed out.

Because of my free drug use, I slept well and woke up early. Despite being well rested, I was back to the same excited frenzy from the night before. Hastily dressed, straightened the collar around my neck, rolled up the black sweater until it rested against my jeans. I looked out the window and saw that Charlie was gone. A thin layer of cotton clouds covered the sky. They do not seem extraordinarily strong.

I ate breakfast without tasting it, and after my work, I hurriedly packed. I looked out the window again, but nothing had changed. I had just finished brushing my teeth and was on my way downstairs when a quiet thump beat my heart against my ribs.

I flew to the door; I had a little trouble with a simple dead bolt, but finally I wiggled the door and there it was. When he looked at her face, all excitement disappeared, and calmness replaced it. I felt relieved - yesterday's fears seemed so silly here.

He was not smiling at first - his face was in a frown. But then, as he looked at me, his expression lightened, and he laughed.

'Good morning,' he laughed.

'What's wrong?' I looked down to make sure I had not forgotten anything important, like shoes or pants.

'We'll be the same.' He laughed again. I realized he was wearing a long, light black sweater with a white- collar underneath and blue jeans. I laughed at him, hiding a secret regret - why does he look like a runway model when I cannot?

I closed the door behind me as he walked to the car. He was waiting at the passenger door easily understanding the martyr's expression.

'Deal,' I reminded him sarcastically, getting into the driver's seat and reaching to open the door.

'Where?' I asked.

'Put your seat belt on - I'm nervous.'

I gave him a dirty look as I complied.

'Where?' I repeated with a sigh.

'Dad one- Ey- one north,' he ordered.

It was surprisingly hard to focus on the road when I felt his gaze on my face. I paid to drive more carefully than usual in the still sleeping city.

'Are you planning on going out to McAuley at night?'

'This car is your grandfather's car, respect it,' I replied.

Despite his negativity, we were soon out of town. Thick bushes and trees covered with green trees replaced lawns and houses.

'Then turn right,' he pointed when he wanted to ask. I obeyed silently.

'Now we drive until the pavement ends.'

I could hear the smile in his voice, but I was too scared to take the car off the road and look at it and prove him right.

'And what's at the end of the sidewalk?' I am interested.

'A trace.'

'Are we going?' Thank God, I was wearing tennis shoes.

'Is this a problem?' He was expecting.

'No.' I tried to pull off the lie confidently. But if he thinks my car is slow...

'Don't worry, it's only five miles and we're in no rush.'

Five miles. I did not answer so he would not hear my panicked voice. Five miles of treacherous roots and loose rocks trying to twist my ankles or otherwise wear me down. This is embarrassing.

We drove in silence for a while as we contemplated the horror that lay ahead.

'What do you think?' he asked patiently after a few minutes.

I lied again. 'I'm just confused about where we're going.'

'This is where I like to go when the weather is nice.' After he finished speaking, we both looked out the windows at the scattered clouds.

'Charlie said it was very hot today.'

'And you told Charlie what you were planning?' - he asked.

'No.'

'But does Charity-Anna think we'll be together in Altoona?' He enjoyed the idea.

'No, I told him you left me - that's true.'

- Does anyone know that I am with you? Anger, now.

- That depends... I thought you told Naddalin Natalie?

'That would be very helpful, Lily,' he said.

I pretended I did not hear it.

'Are you depressed in McAuley to the point of suicide?' He asked when I ignored him.

'You said you might cause trouble for you... let's go out together,' I remembered.

'So, you're worried about the trouble it might cause me if you don't come home?' His voice was angry and bitterly sarcastic.

I nodded, staring at the road.

He whispered something under his breath, he spoke so fast that I could not understand.

We were silent the whole way. I could feel waves of anger rolling over him and I could not think of anything to say.

- And-

Then the road narrowed to a thin path with a small wooden marker. I parked on the narrow shoulder and got out, afraid that he would get mad at me and that I was not driving as an excuse not to look at him. It is hot now, hotter than McAuley has been since I arrived, almost cloudy under the clouds. I took off the sweater and tied it around my waist, glad to be wearing a light, sleeveless shirt- especially when I had a five- mile hike ahead of me.

I heard the door close, and I looked back to see him taking off his sweater again. He was facing away from me in the uncut forest next to my car.



'This way,' he said, looking over his shoulder at me, his eyes still nervous. He entered the dark forest.

'The road?' The panic was clear in my voice as I hurried around the car to get to him.

'I said that there is a road at the end of the road, not because we went through it.

'No trace?' I asked desperately.

'I won't let you get away from me.' Then he turned around with a smile and I caught my breath. His white shirt was sleeveless and unbuttoned so the smooth white skin of his throat flowed over the marble contours of his chest, his perfect muscles no longer meant to be hidden behind the clothes. He was so perfect; I felt a sharp stab of despair. This divine being is not for me.

He looked at me, confused by my tortured expression.

'Do you want to go home?' He said quietly, his voice full of pain that was different from mine.

'No.' I walked forward until I was next to him, anxious not to waste another second of my time with him.

'What's wrong?' he asked, his voice low.

'I'm not a good hiker,' I said flatly. 'You must be very patient.'

'I can be patient if I try hard enough.' Catching my gaze, he smiled, trying to shake me out of my sudden, inexplicable depression.

I tried to smile too, but my smile was not convincing. He looked closely at my face.

'I'll take you home,' he promised. I cannot say whether the word is unconditional or limited to immediate departure. I knew she thought it was fear that made me nervous, and I was thankful again that I was the only person who did not hear her mind.

'If you want me to walk five miles through the forest before sunset, you'd better start leading the way,' I said. He looked at my face, struggling to understand my tone and expression.

After a while he stopped and headed towards the forest.

It was not as difficult as I feared. The trail is mostly flat, and it keeps the wet fern and moss away for me. When his straight path took us over fallen trees or rocks, he would help me up, lift me by my elbow, and then let me go as soon as it was clear. His cool touch on my skin never

made my heart skip a beat. Twice, when this happened, I looked at his face to make sure he heard it.

I tried to keep my eyes away from his perfection as much as possible, but I always slipped. Every time I feel sad for her beauty.

Most of the time we go quietly. Every now and then he would ask a random question that he had not been asked in the past two days. He asked about my birthdays, my classmates, my childhood pets - and I must admit that after killing three fish in a row, I gave up on the whole business. He laughed louder than I used to- like a bell ringing back to us from the empty forest.

The walk lasted most of the morning, but he never showed any sign of impatience. The forest spread around us in an endless maze of ancient trees, and I began to worry that we would never find our way again. He was completely at ease, comfortable in the green maze and had no doubts about our direction.

After a few hours, the light filtering through the attic changed, from a dark olive tone to a brighter jade. The day became sunny, as he had said before. For the first time since we entered the woods, I felt excitement- which quickly turned to impatience.

'Are we there yet?' I scoffed, pretending to frown.

'Almost.' He smiled at my change of mood. 'Do you see the light in front of you?'

I looked at the dense forest. 'Eh, should it be?'

He smiled. 'Maybe a little early for your eyes.'

'Time to see the optometrist,' I said. His smile brightened.

But then, after a hundred yards, I saw a flash of lightning in the trees ahead, a flash of yellow instead of green. I increased my speed, my enthusiasm increased with each step. He let me continue, watching silently.

I reached the edge of the pool of light and crossed the last edge of the wings into the most beautiful place I had ever seen. The meadow was small, perfectly round, and full of wildflowers- purple, yellow, and soft white. I heard the music of the bubbling river nearby. The sun was directly overhead, filling the circle with a haze of oily sunlight. I walked slowly marveling at the soft grass, the swaying flowers, and the warm, golden air. I turned around to share with him, but he was not behind me where I had him. I turned around looking for him with sudden excitement. At last, I saw him, still under the thick shadow of the canopy

at the edge of the hole, looking at me with wary eyes. Then I remembered what had been removed from my mind in the beauty of the meadow- the mystery of Melvin and the sun, which he had promised to describe for me today.

I took a step back towards him, my eyes shining with curiosity. His eyes were wary, reluctant. I smiled encouragingly and waved at him, taking another step back. He raised a hand in warning, and I hesitated, falling back on my heels.

Melvin took a deep breath and then stepped out into the bright afternoon sunlight.

### 13 Delirium

Melvin's Confessions in the Sunlight was shocking. I could not get used to it, even though I had been watching it all afternoon. Her skin, white despite the faint stream from yesterday's fishing trip, sparked limousines of tiny diamonds embedded on the surface.

He was lying completely on the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted and glowing chest, his arms glistening naked. His pale, sparkling lavender eyelids were closed, although, of course, he did not sleep. A perfect statue, carved from an unknown stone, smooth as marble,

shimmering like crystal. From time to time, his lips would move very quickly as if they were trembling.

But when I asked, he told me he sings for himself. It was too low for me to hear it. I also appreciate the sun, even if the air is not dry enough for my taste. I wanted to lie, like him, and let the sun warm my face. But I kept crooked, my chin resting on my knees, not wanting to take my eyes off him. The wind was nice. My hair tangled and the grass swayed about its fixed shape. The prairie, which was startling to me at first, pales next to its splendor.

Hesitating, I was still afraid, even now, that he would disappear like a mirage, too good to be true... I hesitantly extended his hand and pressed the back of his twinkling hand, as it was within reach. Once again, I marveled at the perfect texture, smooth, bright, and stone-cold texture. When I looked again, his eyes were open, looking at me. Today's Butterscotch is lighter and warmer after hunting. Her quick smile made the corners of her lips appear flawless.

I am not afraid of you, he asked playfully, but I could hear true curiosity in his soft voice. Not more than usual. Smiles wider. His teeth flickered in the sun. I got closer, reaching out with my whole hand now to trace the contours of his forearm with my fingertips. I saw my fingers

trembling and I knew it would not escape his attention. 'Does it bother you?' I asked as he closed his eyes again. No, he answered without opening his eyes.

'You cannot imagine how that feels. He sighed. I rolled my hand gently over the perfect muscles in his arm, following the faint pattern of blue veins within the crease of his elbow. With the other hand, she reached out to return her hand. After realizing what I was wishing for, he raised his palm in one of his blinding- worrisome motions. This startled me. I froze.

My fingers rested on his arm for a brief second. Sorry, he whispered. I looked in time to see his golden eyes up close. 'It is so easy to be me with you. I raised her hand, turned it in that direction, and watched the sunshine from the palm of her hand. I held him close to my face, trying to see the hidden sides of his skin.

'Tell me what you think,' he whispered. I looked up to see his eyes looking at me, suddenly deliberately. 'It's always so weird to me, I don't know.' 'You know, the rest of us feel this way all the time.' It is a hard life. I imagined a hint of regret in his tone. 'But you didn't tell me.' 'I wish I knew what you were thinking...' I hesitated.

- And-

Then? 'I wish I could believe you were real. I wish I were not afraid. I don't want you to be afraid.' Her voice was just a whisper. I heard what he could not say frankly that I had no need to be afraid, and there was nothing to be afraid of. 'Well, that is not exactly fear I meant, although that is something to think about. So quickly I missed his move, half sitting, leaning on his right arm, his left palm still in my hand. The face of his angel was a few centimeters away. Only from my face. I could - I should - turn away from his unexpected proximity, but I could not move. Golden eyes hypnotized me. What are you afraid of then? It is so intense.

But I could not respond. As I did only once, I felt his fresh breath on My face. Sweet, delicious, the smell made my mouth water. It was like nothing else. Instinctively, without thinking, I leaned closer, inspired.

And he was gone, ripping his hand from mine. By the time my eyes took focus, he was twenty feet away, standing on the edge of a small meadow, in the deep shade of huge spruce. He was looking at me, his eyes darkened in the shadows, his expression unreadable. I felt pain and shock



on my face. I stung my empty hand. I... Sorry... Melvin whispered. I was I know he can hear.

Give me a moment,' loud enough for my fewer sensitive ears. I sat very still. After ten impossibly long seconds, he slowly turned back for him. He stopped, still a few yards away, and sank gracefully to the ground, cross- legged. His eyes never left mine. He took two deep breaths, then smiled apologetically. I am so sorry. He is hesitant. 'Do you understand what I mean if I say I am just a human? I nodded once, completely unable to smile at a joke. My adrenaline was pulsing in my veins as awareness of danger slowly sank. He could feel it from where he was sitting.

His smile turned sarcasm. I am the best animal predator in the world, isn't it? Everything about me calls out to you - my voice, my face, and even my smell. As if I needed it all! Unexpectedly, he was on his feet, turning at once, out of sight, to appear under the same tree as before, having roamed around the meadow in half a second. He said bitterly as if you could pass me. He reached out his hand and with a deafening crack, he effortlessly tore a branch two feet thick from the trunk of a spruce. He prepared it with that hand for a moment, and then threw it very quickly,

and smashed it against a tree. Another huge, I shivered and shivered from the blow.

He was in front of me again, standing two feet away, still like a stone. He said softly as if you could fight me. I sat still, afraid of him more than I had ever seen. I had never seen him Completely liberated from this carefully cultivated facade, he was never less human...or more handsome. Two yen wide like a bird trapped in the eyes of a snake. Her beautiful eyes seemed to sparkle with reckless excitement.

- And-

Then, as the seconds passed, it faded away. His expression slowly transformed into an ancient melancholy mask. He whispered, fear not, his velvety voice inadvertently seductive. 'I promise...' he hesitated. 'Don't be afraid,' he whispered again as he approached very slowly. He sat zigzag, deliberate non-hasty movements until our faces were flat, feet apart. Please forgive me,' he said solemnly. 'I can control myself. She took me on a whim. But I am on my best behavior now. Wait, but I still cannot speak. Honestly, I am not thirsty today. I wink. At the time, I must have laughed, though the voice was quivering nor 'How's it going?' he asked tenderly, arriving slowly and cautiously, replacing his marble hand in mine.

I looked at his soft, cold hand, then looked into his eyes. They were companions, repentant. I looked at his hand, then purposely went back to tracing the lines in his hand with my fingertips. I looked up and smiled shyly. His smile in reply was dazzling. So where were we before I acted so rudely? He asked in the sweet rhythms of the last century.

Honestly, I do not remember. He smiled but his face blushed. 'We were talking about why you were afraid, as well as the obvious reason. 'Oh, that's right.' 'Good?' I looked at his hand and scribbled aimlessly on his soft, iridescent palm. Seconds passed. How easily get frustrated,' he sighed. I looked into his eyes and suddenly realized that this was just as new to him as it was to me.

With so many years of unfathomable experience, it was hard for him too. I was encouraged by this thinking.' I was scared. ...because, for obvious reasons, I cannot stay with you. And I am afraid I would love to stay with you, too much. 'I looked at his hands while I was talking. It was hard for me to say it aloud.' Yes,' he slowly agreed. And he sighed, 'It is something you should be afraid of, really. Desire to be with me. It is not in your best interest. I frowned. I should have left a long time ago,' he sighed.

'I should leave now. But I do not know. Not if I can.' I mutter pathetically, staring again 'I don't want you to go.' That is exactly why I should do it. But do not worry. I am a selfish creature. I long for your company so much to do what I must do.' 'I am happy.' Do not be! He pulled his hand more gently this time. His voice was harsher than usual. Difficult for him, even more beautiful than any human voice. It was hard to follow him- his sudden mood swings always made me regress, into a daze.

'What I want is not just your business! We did not forget it. Never forget that I am more dangerous to you than anyone else. He stopped and looked to see him staring rudely into the woods. I thought for a moment. I do not think I understand exactly what you mean- with that last part anyway,' I said. He looked at me and smiled, his mood changed again. How do I explain myself? He thought. On command, he put his hand back in mine; I held it firmly in both of mine. He looked at our hands. It is so pleasant, the heat.' He sighed.

A moment passed as he gathered his thoughts. Do you know how everyone enjoys assorted flavors? He began. 'Some people like chocolate ice cream and others prefer strawberries? I nodded. Sorry for the food analogy- I cannot think of another way to explain.' She smiled. He

smiled again sadly. As you can see, everyone smells different and has a different essence.

If you shut an alcoholic in a room full of old beer, he will drink it with pleasure. But he could resist if he wanted to if he was recovering from alcoholism. Now suppose you put in this room a glass of century- old brandy, the rarest and finest cognac - and fill the room with its warm aroma - how do you think it gets away? We sat in silence, looking into each other's eyes - trying to read each other's thoughts.

Break the silence first. This comparison may not be correct. Then it is too easy to refuse brandy. I have turned our alcoholic into a heroin addict instead. So, what you are saying is I am your heroin brand? She sneered, trying to lighten the mood. He smiled quickly, seeming to appreciate my efforts. 'Yes, you are exactly my type of heroin.' 'Does this happen often?' I asked him. He looked through the treetops, thinking about his answer. I told my brothers about it. He was still looking away,

'To Jae, all of you are so alike. He is the newest to join our family. It is a struggle for him to abstain at all. He has not had time to become sensitive to differences in aroma and flavor.' He looked at me. Quickly, his expression was apologetic. Sorry, he said. I do not mind. So please do not worry about offending me, scaring me, or anything.

That is what you think. I can understand, or at least try. Just explain while you took a deep breath and looked up at the sky again, so Jae was not sure if he had met someone who looked like - he hesitated, looking for the right word - 'attractive as you are to me. This makes me not think Dejen has been in the wagon for a while. Longer and he understood what I meant. He says to him twice, once more than the other. 'And for you?'

The word lingered for a while in the stifling air. What is Dejen doing? I asked to break the silence. It was the wrong question to ask. His face darkened; his hand clenched into a fist. He looked away. I waited but he did not answer me. 'I know,' I finally said.

He looked up; His demeanor was subtle, pleading. Even the strongest among us have fallen off the wagon, haven't they?' 'What are you asking? My will?' My voice sounded louder than I expected. I tried to return the favor - I imagine what his loyalty must be. lost him. 'So, there is no hope? How can I talk about my peace in peace!' No, no, he at once regretted, 'Surely there is hope! I mean, I do not.'

He left this sentence hanging, my eyes burning. 'It is different for us. Dejen... these are strangers you know. It was a long time ago, and he was not used to being the same... be careful as he was.' Now. He was

silent and looked at me carefully, thinking. 'So, if we meet ... or the path is dark or something...' I pulled him. He took it. In the middle of that room. Everything I should not jump over it. It is full of children and,' he stopped suddenly, looking away. 'I would have ruined everything. Melchor built right there when you passed me. If I had denied my thirst for years, I would not have been able to stop it. He stood laughing in front of the trees. He looked at me sadly and missed us both. 'I must think I am caught. 'I do not understand why. How could you hate me so quickly...'

'To me, you seemed like demon summoned from my hell to destroy me. The smell of your skin...I thought of you. you messed it up on the first day. At that time, I was going to take you out of my room, to do it alone.' I thought of diverse ways. And I fought each of them, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run; run before I said the words you wanted to follow...' Then he looked at me strangely as I tried to absorb his painful memories. His golden eyes burned beneath his lashes. It is addictive and deadly. He was coming.'

He promised. I tried to speak calmly. 'Without a doubt. He freed me from the power of his eyes. 'And when I tried to fix my routine in a vain attempt to finish it, look it was close and warm in that small room, the smell was sickening. I almost took it then. There was only one

weakling there - extremely easy to deal with. I shivered in the bright sun, seeing my memories in his eyes, only now I saw the danger.

Poor Mrs. Stackawitz; I was also shocked that I handled his accidental death. But I refused. I do not know how. I force myself not to wait for you, not to follow you from school. It was easier to think clearly, to make the right decision, when I no longer felt it. I left those around me - I was ashamed to tell them how weak I was, they knew something was wrong - and went straight to Melchor, to tell him I was going to the hospital. I watched it in amazement. I swapped cars with him - he had a full tank of gas, and I did not want to stop. I did not dare to go home to confront SM. You will not let me go without a show. He was trying to convince me that it was not important... 'The next morning, I was in Alaska. He seemed ashamed to have accepted such cowardice. 'I spent two days there with people I knew... but I missed home. I hated it when I found out that I had cheated on SM and my whole adopted family. In the cool mountain air, it was hard to believe that he was unstoppable.

I told myself that he is too weak to run away. I have been tested before, not to this degree, not even close, but I was strong. Who are you, little girl' - she just smiled - 'to chase me away from where I want to be? So, I am back...' He stared into space. I could not speak. I take



precautions, hunt, and feed more than usual before I see you again. I was sure I was as strong as anyone to handle it. I was incredibly angry about it. Your reaction to me was so complicated that I could not read your mind. Hearing your words in Charity-Anna's mind, I did not use to take tricky steps... Her mind is not the first thing, and it was annoying that she depended on it. And then I could not tell if you meant it. It was all very annoying. He frowned at the memory. I wanted you to forget my behavior on the first day if possible, so I tried to talk to you like I would anyone else.

I was looking forward to understanding some of your thoughts. But you were so interesting, I got caught up in your conversations... and from time to time you stirred the air with your hand or your hair, and the smell came back to me again...

For if I had not saved you, I do not think I could have prevented your blood from being shed before me. exposing ourselves to what we are. But I did not think of that excuse until later. At that time, all I could think was, 'It is not him. Closing his eyes, he is lost in his evil confession. Listen to me, impatient more than thinking. Fear. Common sense told me that I should. Instead, I finally calmed down to understand. And even now, as he confessed his desire to kill me, I was filled with

compassion for his suffering. Although my voice. I lost strength, I was able to speak at last.' In the hospital? His eyes flashed at me. 'I was shocked. I cannot believe I put myself in danger after putting myself in your power- you of all people. As if I needed another reason to kill you.

We both walked out when that word came out. 'But it had the opposite effect,' he continued quickly. 'I fought Vivian, Dejen, and Jae when they said it was time...the worst fight we have ever had. Melchor stood next to me and Naddalin Natalie. He shivered when he said her name. I could not imagine why.' I listened to you all. I was shocked that you kept your word. I never understood. But I knew that I could not associate with you. I did my best to stay away from you. And every day the smell of your skin, your breath, your hair ... hit me hard like the first day. I met my eyes again, and they were incredibly soft. Still, he continued, if I had exposed all of us in that first moment, where we are now here- I have no witnesses to stop me and I would be hurting. I was man enough to ask 'why' Lily spoke my full name correctly, then played with her free hand through my hair. He took it off. Panic ran through my body as I was suddenly caught.

You do not know how it hurt me.' He looked down, ashamed again. 'Your thought, still, is white, cold... If I do not see you read again,

you can see that spark of understanding in your eyes again. When you see my disguise... It is impossible.' He raised his big, worried eyes, 'You are the most important thing to me right now, the most important thing to me.' My head was spinning. Suddenly changing the direction our conversation took on the happy topic of my impending death, we revealed ourselves. Suddenly, he waited, and even though I looked down to examine our hands between us, I knew his golden eyes were on me. 'Yes, you know how I feel,' I said at last.' I cringed.

We laughed. I fell in love. I was a lamb...' she whispered, flying away from the words, and hiding her eyes, 'What a stupid sheep,' I muttered, 'what a sharp sick lion.' He stared. In the dark forest for a long time, I wondered where his thoughts took him, and why...? 'I started, I was silent for a while, not knowing what to do. He looked at me and smiled, the sun was shining on him. His face, his teeth. Yes?' 'Tell me why you ran away from me earlier. His smile disappeared. 'You know why.' 'No, I mean what exactly did I do? I must be careful, you see, so I better start learning what not to do. This is an example' - he slapped the back of his hand. 'It looks good.' He smiled again.

'You didn't do anything wrong, Lily.' But I want to help, if I can, not make it difficult for you. 'Okay...!' he thought for a moment. 'It

was the way you were close. Most people automatically avoid us, they hate our isolation... I did not expect you to be this close. And the smell of your throat. He paused, trying to see if I was upset. It is okay, I said slowly, trying to calm my suddenly tense breath. I stretched my chin. 'No throat exposure.' It worked; he laughed. 'No, it was more of a miracle than anything. He raised his free hand and placed it gently on my neck. I remained silent; the coldness of his touch was a natural warning- a warning telling me to be afraid. But there was no feeling of fear in me. But there were other feelings... 'You see,' he said. 'Exceptionally good. I was bleeding and I wished I had slowed it down, I felt it making everything more difficult - the sound of my heart racing. I can hear it. The razor on your cheek is lovely,' he then whispered at that moment at that given time. He let go of his other hand slowly, my hands fell to my knees and slowly caressed my cheek, and then he cupped my face with his marble hands; but gently, he put his cold cheek on the hole at the back of my throat. He sat on it. I cannot move though. I wanted to hear his breathing as I watched the sun, and the wind play with his copper hair more than any other part of his body. and I heard him take a breath. But his hands moved to my shoulders, and when they stopped, they did not stop. His face turned to the side; his nose brushed my bone. He pressed the side of his face gently to me. Chest, be quiet.

Feel my heart. Well, he breathed. I do not know. that we stayed and how long we did not move. It could be hours. Eventually, the heartbeat subsided, but it caught me. He did not move or speak after that. I always knew it could be more and my life would end- even if I did not realize it so soon. And I could not be afraid. I could not think of anything else but him touching me. He challenged me. His eyes were peaceful. After that, that is all Gary said happily. Was it too hard for you?' 'It is not as bad as I thought. What about you?'

No, it was not bad...for me. He smiled at the inflation. 'You see what I mean.' I smiled. Here. He took my hand and placed it on his cheek. 'Do you feel how hot it is? And it was so hot, his skin was often cold. But when I touched her face, I could not see what I had been dreaming about since the first day I saw her. Do not move,' I whispered. No one will ever be like Melvin again. He closed his eyes and became like a carved stone in my hand. I moved slower than he did, being careful not to make an unexpected move. I caressed her cheek, lightly caressed her eyelid, the purple shadow in the hole under the eye. I carefully traced the shape of her perfect nose and her flawless lips.

His lip's part under my hand, and I feel his cool breath on my finger. I wanted to curl up and breathe in his scent. And when I drop my

hand and bend over, I do not want to push him too far. He opened his eyes and was hungry. Not in a shocking way, but by tightening the muscles in the pit of my stomach and making my heartbeat in my veins again. I wish, he whispers, that you...feel the complexity...the confusion... that I feel. You can understand. He raised his hand to my hair, then rubbed it gently over my face. Tell me, I sighed. I do not think I can do it. I told you that on the other hand, I feel for you hunger - thirst - the miserable creature that I am. And I think you can understand that. Although' - he smiled slightly.

'Then since you are not addicted to any illegal substance, you cannot completely regret it. 'But...' His fingers lightly touched my lips, making me shiver again. 'There are other hungry people. That was a hunger that I did not understand at all. 'Maybe I understand this better than you think.' 'Me? I stopped. 'Nothing at all. He had never known before. He took my hands and put them in his. They feel very weak because of the strength of the metal. 'I don't know how to touch you,' he admitted.

'I do not know if I can. I slowly leaned forward and warned him with my eyes. I put my cheek on his stone chest. I could hear his breathing, and nothing else. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Humanly, he put his hands on me and pressed his face into my hair.

'You're better than you give yourself a chance,' I remarked. I have human nerves - they may be buried deep, but they are there. We stayed like that for another immeasurable moment; I wondered if he was as reluctant to move as I was. But as the light fades, I see the shadows of the forest begin to touch us, and I sigh. You must go.' 'I thought you couldn't read my mind.' It is getting clearer and clearer. I hear a smile in his voice.

He takes my shoulder and I look at his face. 'Can I show you something?' he asked, happiness in his eyes. Show me what?' 'I'll show you how to walk in the woods.' He watched my speech 'Don't worry, you'll be fine, we'll get to your car in no time.' His mouth trembled. He flashed that crooked smile that was so sweet my heart almost stopped. Are you going to turn into a bat?' I ask suspiciously. He laughed louder than I could hear!

'That's right, I'm sure you'll always find it that way.' 'Come on, you little coward, get on my back.' I waited to see if I was joking, but he was right. He read my doubts and extended his hand, my heart responded, although I could not hear my thoughts, my heartbeat was still beating, so with little effort, he began to caress my back. When he was there, he hugged me My legs and arms tightly and choked the average person. It is like sticking to a stone. Ah!' he said with a snort. His eyes widen. It was

the first time I had seen him so happy. I was surprised, he just grabbed my hand, pressed my palm to his face, and took a deep breath. in everything. The clock ticked.

Then he ran. I was scared in front of him. The rush was nothing compared to what I felt now. Like a gunshot, he plunged into the thick black forest. There was no sound, no. proof that the feet touched the ground. His breathing did not change, he showed no effort. But the trees passed by at a deadly speed. It was inches away from us. I was too afraid to close my mouth. eyes, although the cold forest wind hit my face and closed it. I felt like I was sticking my head out of the steam train window.

And, for the first time in my life, I felt motion sickness. Then this morning, Melvin, we had walked for hours to get to the field, and now, in a few minutes, we were back in the car. We were excited, weren't we? to come down. I tried but my muscles did not respond. My arms and legs revolved around him as my head spun. They were locked in. Lily? he asked, worried now. I think I should go to sleep.' I panted. 'Oh, sorry. He was waiting for me, but I could not move.

'I need help.'. He brought me closer to him, he brought me closer to him like a little child. He held me for a moment, then carefully placed me on a light fern. How are you feeling? he asked. I was not sure



how to feel when my head was spinning so much. 'I'm thinking Dizzy' 'Put your head between your knees' I tried that helped a little. I took a deep breath and took it out slowly, leaning my head down and feeling him sit next to me. Seconds passed, and finally, I realized I could lift my head. There was a ringing in my ears. 'I don't think that's a good idea,' he thought. I tried to be sure, but my voice was weak. 'No. This was fun.' » Ha! You are as white as a ghost- no, as white as I am!

'I think I should have closed my eyes.' 'Remember next time.' 'Next time!' I cried. He laughed, nervous. you are still shining. Show yourself, he muttered. Open your eyes, Lily, he said softly. Here he is, close to me... His beauty blew my mind - it was too much, more than usual.' I thought, as I ran... he took a break. I hope not to hit the trees.' I am stupid, I am sorry. 'For me, running is second nature, thinking is not an issue for me. show- off, I mumbled again. he smiles No, he continued, I thought there was something I wanted to try. Again, he covered my face with his hand. breathe and kiss me. He hesitated - in a normal way, not in a normal way.

At that moment before kissing, it is not like he hesitates to see how he receives. He hesitates to extend his time, this is an enjoyable time to wait, and sometimes it is better than kissing. Melvin hesitated to check

himself, to see if he was safe, to make sure he was still in control of his urges. And then his cold and marble lips pressed very gently on me. It is my response that neither of us is prepared for. The blood that boiled under my skin burned my lips. Breathe wildly. My fingers are stuck in my hair, and I turn it around. My head was full of color and my lips parted as I breathed in.

- And-

Then I felt a stone turning from below my lips. His hands gently, but with irresistible force, pushed my face back. I opened my eyes and saw the guard's expression. I felt relieved. This is an understatement. His eyes were wild, and his jaw was clenched, but he did not utter a word. My face was about an inch away from him. My eyes widened. Should I eat it...?' I will release him; I will give him a certain part. His hands do not allow me to move even an inch. 'My dear.' The sound is smooth and controlled. Looking my eyes at him, the joy in them is faint and soft. Then he gave a surprisingly weak smile. I asked him. We laughed aloud. 'I am stronger than I thought. I wish I could say the same thing.' Sorry.' 'You're only one person. Thank you very much.'

I said in a crisp voice. He was standing on one of the stairs, his movements were not visible. He was incredibly careful not to contact

us. We had recovered more than I thought. He asked me for more help than I thought. My balance has not yet been returned. 'Are you still weak from the competition? Was it my knowledge about the kiss?'

How much light appeared, now he was laughing like a man, his face was not worried. He was different from Melvin I knew. And I felt a sexual assault on him. Separation causes physical pain. From him now, 'I can't be confident, I'm still in trouble.' I said, 'it is the smaller of the two are you old? Then slowly. I am sure that is true, but I do not think my nerves, or my car, can handle it. Some people believe that is so. My hand was in my pocket, the key was tightly wound. I pursed my lips, then with a strong smile I shook my head. Ai. It is not a chance. He raised his head in disbelief. I went to the driver's side and started walking around him. If I had not wavered a little, he might have given me a gift. Then again, he could not do it. An arm around my waist created an inevitable trap. Lily, I have made a lot of personal efforts to keep you alive at this time. You cannot even go straight and leave the wheel behind the wheel.

Also, friends do not allow their friends to get drunk and drive,' he said with a laugh. I smelled the unbearable sweet smell coming from her chest. drunk? I resisted him. You are blessed by my presence. He smiled again. I cannot argue with this' I said breathlessly. There was no

road around him; I could not resist him in any way. I threw the key high, I was looking at it like a flash of lightning. 'It's easy for me - my car is old'. He kissed his lips, from my ear to my back, back and forth. We trembled. Anyway, he finally whispered, 'I have better ideas.'

## 14 Beyond the Mind

He could drive well at reasonable speeds; I must admit. Like so many things, they seemed effortless to him. He barely looked at the road, but the tires never strayed more than an inch from the center lane. He was driving with one hand, my hand on the seat. Sometimes he looked at the sunset, sometimes he looked at me - my face, my hair blowing through the open window, our hands intertwined. He had turned the radio to an old station, and he was singing a song I had never heard. He knows every line. Do you like fifties music?' I asked. The music in the fifties was good. Much better than the sixties or seventies, ugh! He shuddered. 'The eighties were patient. 'Do you ever tell me how old you are?' I asked, hesitant to offend the joker. Is it necessary? His smile, relieved, intact. left. No, but I still wonder...' I mumbled.

'There's no such thing as a mystery to keep you up at night. I wonder if that will annoy you,' he thought to himself. He looked up at the sun; minutes passed. Try me,' I finally said. He sighed, then made his way.

He looked into my eyes as if he had completely forgotten. Everything he saw there must have encouraged him. He looked up at the sun, the light of the changing orb shone off his skin in ruby- like flashes- and he spoke. I was born in Texas in 1901.' He paused and looked at me from the corner of his eye. My face was carefully unsurprised, patient for the rest. He smiled a little and continued. 'Melchor found me in the hospital in the summer of 1918. I was seventeen years old and about to die of the flu in Spain. I could hear my breathing, though it was barely audible to my ears. He looked me in the eye again. I do not remember- it has been a long time, and human memories fade. He was lost in thought for a moment before continuing. 'I remember how it felt when Melchor saved me. It is not an easy thing; it is not something you can forget. 'Your parents?' 'They died early of the disease. I was alone. That is why he chose me. When the epidemic happened, no one realized that I was gone. How did he... save me? A few seconds passed before he answered. He is choosing his words carefully.

'It was exceedingly difficult. But Melchor has always been the most compassionate of us. I do not think you can match his. Equally in history.' He paused. 'For me, it was very, very painful.' I could tell from his mouth that he was not going to say anything about it. Although it was

active, I bared my curiosity. There were so many things I needed to think about, things that were just beginning to come to mind. No doubt his quick mind already had it all figured out. I missed it. His soft voice interrupted my thoughts. 'It created loneliness. This is mostly the reason behind the choice. I was the first of the Melchor family, although Karly soon found out. She fell off a cliff. Somehow, even though her heart was still beating, they took her straight to the hospital morgue.

So, you must die, then to be...' We never said the word, and now I cannot decipher it. No, it is just Melchor. He would not do that to someone who had no other choice. The reverence in his voice was deep whenever he spoke of his father figure. 'But it's easy if the blood is weak,' he continued. He looked down the dark path now, and I could feel the topic closing in. 'And Dejen and Vivian?' Then Melchor brought Vivian into our family. I did not realize until much later that Karly hoped she would be to him what she was to him- he was wary of the idea. Around me. Eyes. 'But she was never more than a sister. It was not until two years later that she met Dejen again. She was hunting- we were in Appalachia at the time. She found a bear about to finish her off. Fearing she could not do it herself, she took him to Melchor, a hundred miles away. What a trip. I was beginning to think it was hard for her. He was still stuck, brushing my

cheek with the back of his hand. But she did,' I encouraged, looking away from the irresistible beauty of her eyes. Yes, he whispered.

'She saw something in her face that made her strong. And they are together.' from. Sometimes they live apart from us, like a couple. But the more we pretend, the longer we can stay in a certain place. McAuley seemed perfect, so we all enrolled in high school.' He laughed. 'We'll have to go to their wedding again in a few years.' 'Naddalin Natalie and Jae?' 'Naddalin Natalie and Jae are two exceedingly rare creatures. Both developed consciousness, as we call it, without any external guidance. Jae was a different... family, quite different. They wandered in despair. Alone, Naddalin Natalie found her. Like me, she had gifts beyond the norm for our species. 'Really?' I interrupted, I learned. She knows other things. She sees things - she sees things that can be, things that will work, but it is so real, the future is not set in stone.' So quickly I was not sure what kind of things she sees?' She saw Jae and knew he wanted her before he knew it himself.

She saw Melchor and our family, and they gathered to find us. She is more sensitive to non-humans. She always sees another group of us coming, for example. And any They can pose a threat. 'Are there many... of your kind?' I wondered. How many could walk among us undetected?

'Few. But most of them do not stay in one place. They are the only ones like us' - a sly look in my direction - 'who can live with humans for a while. We have only had one other family like us in a small town in Alaska. We have been together for a while.' We lived, but because there were so many of us, we became very visible. We lived... that tended to group together in diverse ways.'

'What about the others?' Nomads, mostly. We've all been this way at times. It gets boring like anything else. But we meet with others from time to time because most of us prefer the north. for what We were now standing in front of my house, and he had turned off the car. It was incredibly quiet and dark; There was no moon. The porch light was off, so I knew my father was not home yet. Are your eyes open this afternoon?' He scoffed. 'Do you think I can walk on Sun Road without causing a traffic accident?' There is a reason we chose the Olympic Peninsula, one of the sunniest places in the world. It is nice to be able to go out during the day. You will not believe how many nights you sleep in eighty years. 'So, this is where the legends come from?' 'Maybe' 'And Naddalin Natalie was from another family, like Jae?' No, and that is a mystery. Naddalin Natalie never remembers her human life. And you do not know who made her. She woke up alone.



Whoever made it is gone, and none of us understand why or how. If she had not had that other feeling, if she had not seen Jae and Melchor and knew that one day, she would be one of us, she would be completely savage. I still wanted to ask because it was too much to think about. But much to my shame, my stomach growled. I was so excited that I did not even notice how hungry I was. I just realized I was curious.

'Sorry, I'll stop you from eating dinner.' 'I'm fine.' 'I have never spent much time with a foodie. I forgot.' 'I want to stay with you. It was easier to speak in the dark when I spoke of how my voice betrayed me, my hopeless dependence on him. Cannot log in? Do you like him?' He opened the door for me at once. Very personable.' I thanked him. It is resurrection. He would walk by me at night, so I had to watch him constantly to make sure he was quiet. He was still there, in the dark he looked so familiar. Still pale, still dreamlike in its beauty, but not a wonderful creature that sparkles on a sunny afternoon.

He reached the door in front of me and opened it for me. I stopped. Halfway through the frame. The door is open. Hey?' No, I used the key under the eaves. I went in, turned on the porch light, and turned to look at him with a raised eyebrow. I was sure I had never used that key in front of him. 'I was excited to meet you.' 'Did you spy on me?' But

somehow, I could not make my voice sound with the proper anger. I was happy for him. I did not repent. 'What else should I do at night? I let him. He walked down the hall to the kitchen for a moment. He was before me; he needed no instructions.

He sat on the chair I tried to guess him. The beauty lit up the kitchen. Without looking back, I focused on my dinner and took last night's lasagna from the fridge, placed a square on the plate, heated it in the microwave, spinning, filling the kitchen with the aroma of tomatoes and oregano. I did not take my eyes off the plate as I spoke. 'How long?' I asked him casually. Hmm? 'Looks like I picked it up from another train idea. I still have not come back. 'How long have you been here?' I come here every night. I turned around in surprise. 'Why?' 'You're charming when you sleep. He said matter- of- fatly. 'You talk' 'No! I gasped; heat flooded my face along my hairline. I grabbed the kitchen counter for help. I knew I was talking in my sleep. My mother teased me about this. I thought there was something troubling here. Her expression at once turned to sadness. 'Are you so madding at me?'

'It depends! I felt my breath taken away from me. He waited. What about us? He urged. What you heard! 'I cried. In an instant, quietly, he was by my side, holding my hands carefully. Do not be upset! he

begged. Catching my eyes, he threw his face to my eye level. I was ashamed. I tried to look away. 'You miss your mother,' he whispered. 'You worry about her. And when it rains, his voice relaxes you. You talk a lot about the house, but now it is less often. One day, I asked, 'It is very green. He laughed softly, hoping I could see. I could not have been more disappointed. Anything else?' He knows where I am coming from. 'You said my name,' he said. I sighed in defeat. 'a lot of?' 'How much do you mean exactly?' 'Absolutely! I hung my head. Gently, naturally, I pulled him to his chest. Do not be shy,' he whispered in my ear. 'If I could ever dream, it would be about you. And I would not be ashamed of it. Then we both heard tires on the brick highway, headlights flashing through the front windows; We saw him coming towards us in the hallway. He stiffened his arms.

Does your father have to know I am here?' He asked. 'I'm not sure...' I tried to think quickly. Another moment then... 'And I was alone.' 'Melvin! I am confused. I heard a ghostly laugh, then nothing else. My father keyed to the door. Lily? he called him. It has bothered me before; Who else would it be? Suddenly, it does not seem so far off base.

Here., I hoped he could not hear the hysterical edge in my voice. She ate dinner from the microwave and sat at the table as he walked

in. Her steps sounded so high after my day with Melvin. Can you tell me a little bit about her? I am thick. He stepped on his heels to take them off, Holding the back of Melvin's chair for the support I took my food with me, and cut it into slices while I ate dinner. My tongue burned. I filled two glasses with milk while the lasagna was heating up and swallowed two glasses to turn off the heat.

When I put the glass down, I noticed the milk was trembling and I realized that my hands were trembling. It was Charlie sitting in the chair, the contrast between him and his former occupant was comical. He said, setting his food on the table. How was your day?' I asked. The words sped up. I was longing to escape to my room. 'Good. The fish were biting. And you? Did you do all you wanted?' Not really - it was nice staying inside. I had another great bite. It was a lovely day,' he agreed, I thought to myself. Finished with the last bite of lasagna, I raised my cup and scooped up the rest of my milk, Charlie surprised me by being observant. 'Are you in a hurry?' 'Yeah, I'm exhausted.' I go to bed early. 'You look a little withdrawn,' he said. Why, oh why, should his night be for attention? 'Was I all I could handle in response? He spoke. He thought. Think. I did not answer. No plans tonight? he asked suddenly. No dad, I just want to get some sleep.'

'None of the townspeople is your kind, right?' He was suspicious, but he tried to play it cool. No, none of the boys have caught my attention yet. I was careful not to overemphasize the boys' words in my quest to be honest with Charlie. 'I thought Buddy Newton might... I said he was friendly.' 'He's just a friend, dad.' Well, you are too good for all of them anyway. Wait until you get to college to start your search. Every father dream of getting his daughter out of the house before the hormones start. 'Sounds like a good idea to me,' I agreed as I walked up the stairs. Night, my dear,' he called to me. No doubt he had been listening intently all evening, waiting for me to try to sneak up on me. 'See you in the morning, Dad.

You see crawling into my room tonight in the middle of the night to check on me. I made my treading sound slow and tiring as I climbed the stairs to my room. I shut the door hard enough to be heard, then ran on tiptoes towards the window. I opened it and leaned back into the night. I examined my dark eyes and the impenetrable shadows of the trees. Melvin? Whisper, I feel silly. The quiet reply and laughter came from behind me.

'Yes?' I turned, one hand flying into my throat in surprise. He was lying there, grinning heavily, on my bed, hands behind his head, feet

dangling at the end, a picture of relief. Ah! Together, trying to hide his amusement. Just give me a minute to restart my heart. He sat slowly so as not to disturb me again. Then he leaned forward and extended his long arms to hold me and grabbed my arms as if I were a little child. He sat me on the bed next to him. He suggested, putting a cold hand on My hand, why don't you sit with me? 'How is the heart?'

'You tell me, I'm sure you hear it better than I can.' I felt his quiet laughter rock the bed. We sat there for a while in silence, listening to my slow heartbeat. I thought of Melvin in my room, with my father in the house. I asked him, 'Can I have a minute to be human?' Sure. He waved his hand. I went on. I said, 'Stay,' I try to sound stern. 'Yes, madam. And it showed that he had become a statue at the edge of my bed. I jumped up and took my pajamas. Off the floor, my bag of toiletries from the office.

Turn off the light, shut the door, and shut the door. I could hear the TV going up the stairs. I knocked loudly on the bathroom door, so Charlie did not bother me. I wanted to speed up. I brushed my teeth hard, trying to be thorough and quick, removing any trace of lasagna. But the hot water from the shower cannot be rushed. My back muscles relaxed, and my pulse calmed. The familiar scent of the shampoo made me feel like the same person I was this morning. I tried not to think of Melvin

sitting in my room waiting, because after that I had to start over with the healing process. Finally, I could not wait any longer. I turned off the water, hurriedly wiped myself, and rushed over again. I put on my gray checkered shirt and pants.

Too late to regret not wrapping the silk Victoria's Secret pajamas my mother gave me two years ago, on which the cards are still in a drawer somewhere in the house. I rubbed the towel back into my hair, then quickly pulled the brush through it. I threw the towel in the basket and the brush and toothpaste in my bag. Then I went up the stairs so Charlie could see I was in my pajamas, with my hair wet. night, dad. Night, Lily. He was surprised by my appearance. That will stop him from watching me tonight. I climbed the stairs twice at a time, trying to be quiet, and went to my room, shutting the door tightly behind me. Melvin did not move a fraction of an inch, a statue of Adonis crouched on my dull quilt. She smiled, his lips trembled, and the statue came to life.

His eyes were appreciating me, sucking on the wet hair, the ripped shirt. Eyebrow lift. 'Nice. I frowned. No, that sounds good to you.' 'Thank you,' I whispered. I returned to his side, squatting next to him. I looked at the lines on the wooden floor. Was all that helpful?' 'Charlie thinks I'm sneaking.' 'Ah! He thought about it. 'Why?' 'As if he couldn't

know Charlie's mind more clearly than I can guess.' He looked a little excited. 'He raised my chin, examining my face. It looks hot. 'He slowly bent his face toward mine, his gentle cheek pressed against my skin. Still. Mm...' He breathed. It was exceedingly difficult, as he was touching Anna, to formulate a coherent question. It took me a minute of choppy focus to get started. 'It seems... that it is much easier for you, now, to be near me.' 'Does that sound like that to you?' he muttered, his nose sliding into the corner of my jaw. Feeling his hand was lighter than a moth's wing, brushing my wet hair back so his lips touched the hollow under my ear. I answered as I tried to do.

Well.' I started again, but his fingers were slowly tracing his collarbone, and I lost my train of thoughts. Why is that? That is, it, my voice was trembling, embarrassing me, 'Do you think? I felt his breath tremble on my neck as he laughed.' I thought about it. Pull back; as I moved, he froze, and I could no longer hear his breath. We looked at each other cautiously for a moment, then, while his clenched jaw gradually relaxed, his expression became puzzled. Did I do something wrong? No, quite the contrary. I explained. That, 'You're driving me crazy.' He thought about it for a while, and when he spoke, he seemed happy.' Really? A triumphant smile slowly lit up his face.



Do you want a round of applause? I asked sarcastically. smiling. I am just pleasantly surprised.' 'For the past 101 years or so,' said his annoyed voice, 'I've never imagined something like this.' I never thought I would find someone I wanted to be with... in any other way than my siblings. To see, though everything is new to me, that I am so good... to be with you...' 'You are good at everything,' I noted. He shrugged, letting it go, and we both laughed and whispered. But how can it be so easy now? pressed. 'This afternoon...' He sighed- 'It's not easy.' 'But this afternoon, I was still... hesitating. I am sorry about that; it was an unforgivable act of mine. I disagree, 'It's not unforgivable.' Thanks. He smiles. He continued, looking down now, ' Look, I wasn't sure I was strong enough...' He grabbed one of my hands and pressed it gently to his face. 'And while there was still a possibility I'd be overpowered' - he sniffed the scent on my wrist - 'I was... sensitive.' That was... human.

'So, there is no possibility now?' He repeated, smiling, his teeth gleaming even in the dark. Wow, that was easy, I said. He threw his head back and laughed, softly like a whisper, but still copious. Easy For you! He straightened, touching my nose with his fingertips. Then his face suddenly became murderous. 'I try,' he whispered, his voice aching. 'If so... so much, I am sure I can leave. 'I frowned. I did not like talking

about leaving.' 'Tomorrow it will be more difficult. 'Today, and I am getting incredibly sensitive. If I am away from you for a while, I will start over. Not from scratch, I guess.' 'Don't go then,' I replied, unable to hide the desire in my voice. He answered, his face resting in a soft smile. 'Bring the chains- I am your prisoner.

But his long hands were twisted around my wrist as he spoke. He laughed at his soft musical laugh. He laughed more tonight than I have ever heard in all my time with him. You seem more optimistic than usual.' Before. Isn't it supposed to be like this? He smiles.' The glory of first love, and all that. It is amazing, isn't it, the difference between reading something, seeing it in pictures, and experiencing it? 'Very different,' she agreed.

More active than I imagined. 'For example,' - his words flowed in fast now, I had to focus on absorbing everything. 'Feelings of jealousy. I have read about him hundreds of thousands of times, and seen actors portray him in thousands of different plays and movies. I thought I understood that clearly. But it shocked me....' 'Do you remember the day Buddy asked you to dance? I nodded, although I remembered that day for a different reason.

'The day you started talking to me again. I was surprised by the mounting resentment, anger, I felt - I did not realize what it was at first. I was more upset than usual for not knowing what you were thinking, and why you were rejecting it. Was that Just for your friend? Was there anyone else? I knew I had no right to care anyway. I tried not to care. Then a line started forming,' he laughed. He frowned in the dark. I waited, with unreasonable eagerness to hear what you would say to them, to watch your expressions. I could not deny the relief I felt while watching the annoyance on your face.

But I could not be sure. It was the first night I came here. I struggled all night, watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was right and moral and what I wanted. I knew if I kept ignoring you as I had, or if you left for a few years until you go, one day you would say yes to Buddy, or someone like him. You made me angry. Then he whispered, while I was sleeping, I said my name. You spoke so clearly that at first, I thought you woke up. But you relentlessly turned around and hid my name again and sighed.

The feeling that crossed me at that time was unsettling and staggering. And I knew I could not ignore you anymore. He was silent for a moment, listening to my sudden, uneven heartbeat. But jealousy...a

strange thing. Much stronger than I thought it would be. And irrational! Earlier, when Charlie asked you about that bastard Buddy Newton...'He shook his head angrily. I should have known you would listen, moaned. Of course,' 'That made you jealous?' 'I'm new to this; you're rekindling the human in me.' And everything feels stronger because it is new. But frankly, I sneered, just in my mind, after I heard that Vivian- Vivian, the embodiment of pure beauty, Vivian- was for you. Dejen or not Dejen, how can I compete with this?' No competition. His teeth gleamed. He pulled my entrapped hands around his back and carried me to his chest.

As far as possible, breathe cautiously. 'I know there is no competition,' he muttered in his cold skin. This is the problem. Sure, Vivian is beautiful in her way, but even if she were not a sister to me, even if Dejen did not belong, she would never be able to get a tenth, no, a hundredth of my attraction. He was serious now, deep in thought. For ninety years, I have been walking among my people, and your people ... All the time I thought I was completely within, not realizing what I was looking for. And I find nothing because you were not alive yet. 'That hardly seems fair,' I whispered, my face still resting on his chest, and I listen to his breath come and go. I had to wait at all. Why should I get off so easily? 'You're right,' he agreed with amusement. 'I must be harder on

you. Release one hand, release my wrist, to collect it carefully in the other. He gently combed my wet hair, from the top of my head to my waist.' 'You just have to risk your life every second you spend with me, surely not much.' Just to turn your back on nature, on humanity...What is the value of that?' 'Very little - I feel deprived of nothing.'

'Not yet. Suddenly her voice was filled with old sadness. I tried to step back, and look at his face, but his hand closed my wrist. With an unbreakable fist. What- - I began to ask when her body became alert. I froze, but he suddenly released my hand and disappeared. I hardly avoided falling on my face. I shrieked. I could not tell where he was talking in the dark. I rolled under the quilt, and curled up on my side, as I usually slept. I heard the door open, while Charlie looked inside to make sure I was where I was supposed to be. I am breathing evenly, exaggerating the movement. A long minute has passed. I listened; I do not know if I heard the door slam. Then Melvin's cold arm was around me, under the covers, his lips to my ear. You are a terrible actor - I would say the career path is yours. I whispered, 'Damn it. My heart was exploding in my chest. Humming a tune, I did not recognize. It sounded like a lullaby. It is off. I laughed- 'Should I sing to you to sleep?' He reminded me, 'You do that all the time.' But I did not know you were there, I answered here. So, if you do not want

to sleep...' He suggested, ignoring my tone of voice. I caught my breath. If you do not want to sleep...? I laughed it off. 'What would you like to do next?' I could not answer at first. I am not sure,' I said at last. Tell me when you decide.

I feel his cold breath on my neck, I feel his nose sliding down my jaw, Mercado. I thought you were insensitive. 'Just because I'm resistant to wine doesn't mean I can't appreciate the bouquet.' 'Yes, it is a day off and no one tells me how sweet it smells to eat. He laughed, then sighed. I have decided what I want to do,' I told him. 'I want to know more about you.' 'Ask me anything. I revised my questions to find the most important ones.' 'Why would you do that?' I said. 'I still do not understand how you can work like that it is hard to resist what you are...Please do not get me wrong, of course, I am glad you did. I just do not understand why you bothered yourself in the first place.' He hesitated before answering.

'That's a good question, and you are not the first to ask it. They also question the way we live. But you see, just because we... have been given a certain hand... that does not mean we cannot choose to rise above - to overcome the limits of fate None of us want it. To try to retain all the basic humanity we can.' She remained motionless, locked in a strange silence. 'Did you sleep?' He whispered after a few minutes.

No.' 'Is that all you were interested in?' 'I rolled my eyes.' not exactly. 'What else do you want to know?' 'Why can you read minds - why only you? And Naddalin Natalie, seeing the future... Why is this happening?' She felt him shrug. Shoulders in the dark. 'We do not. I do not know. Melchor has a theory... He believes that we all bring some of our strongest human traits with us into the next life, where they are condensed- like our minds and our senses.

He thinks I must have already been overly sensitive to the thoughts of those around me. And that Naddalin Natalie had some foreknowledge, wherever she was. 'Then, and in the others?' Melchor brought his sympathy. Karly brought his ability to love passionately. Dejen brought his strength, Vivian her ... perseverance. Or you could call it 'a- laughing,' Jae is remarkably interesting. He was very charismatic in his early life and was able to influence those around him to see things his way. Now he can manipulate the feelings of those around him - calm a room of angry people, for example, or provoke an idle crowd, and vice versa. It is a very subtle gift. I thought of the impossibilities he had described, trying to understand them. I waited patiently while I was thinking.

So where did all this start? I mean, Melchor changed you, and then someone had to change it, and so... 'Well, where are you from?' has evolved? Establishing? Couldn't we evolve in the same way that other species, predators, and prey have evolved? Or, if you do not believe that this entire world could have happened by itself, which is hard for me to accept myself, is it so hard to believe that the same force that created the delicate shark with the shark and the baby seal and the killer Mercado could create both species together? 'Let me set the record straight - I'm a baby seal, right?'

'That's right. He laughed and something touched my hair- his lips? I wanted to turn to him, to see if his lips were really against mine. But I had to be good; I did not want to make it more difficult for him than it already was.' Ready to sleep? The short silence interrupted, 'Or do you have any other questions?' 'Just a million or two.' 'We have tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...'

He told me. She smiled excitedly at the idea. Are you sure you will not be gone in the morning? Be sure, 'you are legendary, after all.' 'I will not leave you. His voice sealed the promise. 'Again, then, tonight...'

She blushed. The darkness did not help - I am sure it could feel the sudden



heat under my skin. 'What is this?' 'No, forget it. I changed my mind.' Lily, you can ask me anything. I did not answer and groaned.

I keep thinking it would get less frustrating, and I would not listen to your thoughts. But it gets worse. I am glad you cannot read my thoughts. It is bad enough to listen to my sleep talking. 'Please?' His voice was so convincing that it was impossible to resist. I shook my head. If you do not tell me, I will assume it is something much worse than threatening him with darkness. please? You said that Vivian and Dejen are getting married soon...is...marriage... the same for humans? Seriously laughing now, understand. 'Is that what you mean?' Fidgeted, unable to answer. Yes, it is the same,' he said. 'I told you, most of these human desires exist, hidden behind stronger desires. Oh, that is all I can say. Was there a reason behind your curiosity? 'Well, I wondered... about you and me... one day...'

He was instantly serious; I could tell by the sudden stillness of his body. I also froze, and I automatically wanted to. 'I don't think...that... it would be possible for us.' 'Because it would be hard for you if you were... Shut up?' Very brittle. I must be careful of my actions every moment we are together so as not to hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Lily, just by accident. 'His voice has become just a whisper.

His icy palm resting on my cheek 'If I am too hasty... If I am not careful enough for a moment, you reach out, that is, touch your face, and accidentally crush your skull.' You do not realize how incredibly vulnerable you are. I can never lose any kind of control when I am with you. He waited. He asked me, 'Are you afraid?' No. I am fine. He was deliberating for a moment. 'I'm curious now, though,' he said, his voice lit up again. 'Have you ever...?'

Suggestively walk away. of course not. I was ashamed. 'I told you I've never felt this way about anyone before, not even close.' I know. It is just that I know other people's ideas. I know that love and lust do not always keep the same company. They do it for me. Now, anyway, let them be there for me at all,' she sighed. That is nice. At least we have that thing in common. He seemed satisfied. Your human instincts...' I started. I have waited. 'Well, do you find me attractive in this way at all?

He laughed and gently picked up my hair. I may not be a human, but I am a man,' he assured me. forcibly yawned. I answered your questions, now you should fall asleep, 'I insist. I do not know if I could.' 'Do you want me to leave?' 'No! I said very loudly. He laughed, then began to hum the same unknown lullaby. The archangel's voice was soft in

I was more tired than I thought, exhausted from a long day of mental and emotional stress as I had never felt before, I slept in his cold arms.

## 15 SHEZORS

The silent light of another cloudy day finally woke me up. I put my arm over my eyes and felt weak and dazed. Something, a dream that I was trying to remember, was having a tough time entering my consciousness. I groaned and rolled onto my side, hoping for more sleep to come. Then the day before, my consciousness was flooded.

'Ah! I sat up so fast I felt dizzy. Your hair looks like a haystack...but I like it. His raspy voice came from the rocking chair in the corner. Melvin! You stayed! I was happy and without thinking I crossed the room and threw myself into his arms. I was shocked by my own uncontrollable enthusiasm as my thoughts locked onto my actions. I looked at him, afraid that I had crossed the wrong line. But he laughed. Of course, he answered, he was surprised, but he was satisfied with my reaction. His hands rubbed my back. I carefully rested my head on his shoulder and breathed in the scent of his skin. I was sure it was a dream. 'You're not that creative,' he teased.

Charlie! I remembered, without thinking again, I jumped up and went to the door. It went an hour ago - I can add after reconnecting your battery cables. I must admit that I was disappointed. If you were determined to go for it, would it really take that to stop you? I thought about where I was, I wanted to go back to him badly, but I was afraid that I would not be able to catch my breath in the morning. You are not usually confused in the morning,' he said. He kept his arms open for my return. An almost irresistible invitation. I need one more human minute,' I admitted. I will wait. Unrecognizable, I threw myself into the toilet. I did not know myself inside and out. The face in the mirror was alien-overly bright eyes, excited red spots on my cheekbones. After brushing my teeth, I tried to fix the tangled mess in my hair.

I splashed chilly water on my face and tried to breathe normally, with no discernible success. I half ran into my room. It seemed like a miracle that he was there, that his arms were still waiting for me. He extended his hand to me; my heart was beating non-stop. You're welcome, he whispered as he hugged me. She hugged me silently for a while until I felt that her clothes had changed, and her hair was smooth. 'Did you go' I asked, touching the collar of his cold shirt. I could barely leave in the clothes I came in - what would the neighbors think? I spoke. You slept

very soundly; I did not miss anything. His eyes were shining. 'The conversation came earlier. I moaned. 'What did you hear? His golden eyes became incredibly soft. 'You said you loved me.'

'You already knew that' I reminded him, clearing my head. That was nice to hear though. I hid my face on his shoulder. 'I love you,' I whispered. 'It is my life now,' he answered simply. There was nothing to say now. He waved us across the room like it was breakfast time,' he said casually at last-to prove, I am sure, all my human frailties he remembered. So, I squeezed my throat with both hands and looked at him with wide eyes. Shock crossed his face. Just kidding! 'I scoffed. 'And you said I couldn't move!'

He frowned in disgust. It was not funny. It was funny, and you know it. But I looked into his golden eyes to make sure I was forgiven. It was me. Need I rephrase that?' he asked. 'Breakfast time for a human.' Oh, good. He threw me gently over the stone shoulder, but with a speed that took my breath away. I protested as he carried me easily up the stairs, but I ignored. He sat. straight in the chair. The kitchen was bright and cheerful, as if it had absorbed my mood. What was that? 'Any breakfast?'

I asked pleasantly. That threw him for a minute. Um, I am not sure. What would it be? Do you like it?' His marble brow furrowed. I

jumped up and smiled. Well, I am doing well. Watch me hunt. I found a bowl and a box of cereal. I felt his eyes on me as I poured the milk. He took a spoon. I sat my food on the table and then stood. Buy you something Can I?' I asked, not wanting to be rude. He rolled his eyes. 'Eat, Lily.' He sat at the table looking at her. As I took a bite. He was watching me, studying my every move. It embarrassed me. I opened my mouth to talk, to distract him. Today's agenda what is up?' I asked. Hmmm...' I watched as he carefully composed his answer.

How about meeting my family? 'I swallowed. Are you afraid now? He looked hopeful. Yes, I admitted it; how could I deny it - he saw my eyes.' Do not worry. He smiles. 'I will protect you.' 'I'm not afraid of them,' I said. 'I am afraid they...someone...like me...home to meet them? Do they know I know them?' Oh, they already know everything. They had a bet yesterday, you know,' he smiled, but his voice was stern, 'about whether I will get you back, though why anyone would bet against Naddalin Natalie I cannot imagine. In any case, we have no secrets in the family. It is not possible, my mind reading and Naddalin Natalie seeing the future and all that.

-And-

Jae makes you feel hot and fuzzy from spilling his guts, do not forget that. I washed my face. 'So, Naddalin Natalie saw me coming?' His reaction was strange. 'Something like that,' he said uneasily and turned away. so, I could not see his eyes. I was curious. Is he okay?' he asked, turning sharply to me, and glaring at my breakfast. 'Honestly, it does not look too good. appetizing. 'Well, it's not a nervous grizzly...' he muttered, ignoring her as he flashed. I was still wondering why he had responded like that when he mentioned Naddalin Natalie's name. I hurried into my slit, speculating. In the kitchen, again, the statue of Adonis stared out the back windows. Then his eyes turned to me again, and the heart he smiled his splitting smile.

You should introduce me to your father, too, I think. 'He already knows you,' I remembered. As your lover. I looked at him suspiciously. 'Why?' 'Isn't that common?' he asked innocently. I do not know,' I admitted. My dating history gave me a few reference points to work with. Normal dating rules apply here.' Not necessary, you know. I do not expect you to... I mean, you do not have to be pretentious to me.' Her smile was patient. 'I'm not pretentious.' I pushed the remains of my cereal onto the bowl. biting my lip around the edges of the bowl. You are going to tell Charlie if I am your boyfriend or not.' he asked. This is you? 'The

thought of Melvin and Charlie, and I stifled my inner gnashing of teeth at the word. I do not know if we would give it to her at the same time in the same room with my lover or all the gory details.' She reached across the table to lift my chin with a cold, soft finger.

'But why am I so he will need to explain that I am here. I do not want Chief Black to get a restraining order against me. will you?' I asked suddenly, worried. 'Are you really going to be here?' If you want me, she assured me. I will always want you,' I warned. 'Forever.' she reached out to touch her fingertips to my cheek. Her expression was unfathomable. Does that make you sad?' I asked. He did not answer. He looked into my eyes for an immeasurable amount of time. 'Are you done?' he finally asked. I jumped in. 'Yes.' Getting dressed, I will wait here. It was hard to decide what to wear. I doubted there were any etiquette books about what to wear when your vampire love took you home to meet the vampire family. I said that to myself. It was a relief to think. I knew I was purposely avoiding her. I found myself in my only skirt-long, khaki, still casual. I put on a navy-blue blouse that she had once complimented.

A quick look in the mirror told me my hair was completely out of place, so I put it on. put it in a ponytail. OKAY. I went down the stairs. 'I am worthy. He was waiting at the bottom of the stairs, closer than I



thought, and I ran right into him. He teased me, keeping me at a cautious distance for a few seconds before suddenly approaching. He made a mistake again; he whispered in my ear. 'You're completely obscene - no one should look this attractive, it's not fair. » How charming?' I asked. 'Can I change...' he sighed, shaking his head. 'You're so absurd.' He pressed his cold lips gently to my forehead and the room spun. was the question. His fingers moved slowly down my spine, his breath coming faster against my skin.

My hands went limp on his chest, and I felt dizzy again. He slowly tilted his head and pressed his cold lips to mine a second time, very carefully, parting slightly. And then I fell. Lily? His voice was excited as he grabbed me and pulled me up. 'You...make me...weak,' I accused him confusedly. What am I going to do with you? he moaned angrily. 'Yesterday I kissed you and you attacked me.! You passed out on me today! I laughed weakly, letting your arms support me as I felt dizzy. There is a lot to be good at,' she sighed. That is the problem. I was still dizzy. 'You're so good. Ch oh well.' 'Are you sick?' he asked; he had seen me like this before. happened. I shook my head apologetically, 'I forgot to breathe.' 'I can't take you anywhere like that.' 'I'm fine' I said, 'What does it matter if the family thinks I'm crazy anyway?'

He measured my face for a moment. I love that color on your skin,' she suggested unexpectedly. I blushed happily and looked. Look, I am really trying not to think about what to do, can we go now?' I asked. And you are worried not because you are going to meet a bunch of vampires, but because you think they will not like you, right? He shook his head. 'You're amazing.' I realized that as he drove my car out of the main part of town, I had no idea where he lived. The Susquehanna River, the road meandered northward, the houses passing in front of us grew farther and farther away.

Then we drove through the misty forest past other houses. I was trying to decide whether to ask or be patient when he suddenly turned onto an unpaved road. It was unmarked, barely visible among the ferns. The forest encroached on both sides, leaving the road a few feet ahead as it snaked around the ancient trees. And then, after a few miles, the forest thinned out a bit and suddenly we were in a small meadow, or was it really a lawn?

The gloom of the forest was unrelieved, for there were six primordial cedar trees, shading an entire acre with their broad branches. The trees kept their protective shade on the rising walls of the house, and the deep porch surrounding the first floor had worn away. I do not know

what I was expecting, but it certainly was not. The house was timeless, gracious and 100 years old. It was painted a soft, pale white, three stories high, rectangular, and well proportioned. The windows and doors were part of the original structure or a perfect restoration. My car was the only one in sight. Nearby, I could hear the river hidden in the darkness of the forest.

'Wow.' You like it?' He smiled 'It... There is a certain attraction. He pulled the end of my ponytail and was amazed. Ready?' he asked when I opened the door. I did not even go through - let us go. I tried to laugh, but it got stuck in my throat. I was nervously straightening my hair. You are so cute.' He quickly grabbed my hand without thinking. We walked through the deep shadows to the porch. I know he can feel my stress; His thumb rubbed soothing circles on the back of my hand.

He opened the door for me. The inside is more surprising and less predictable than the outside. It is very bright, incredibly open, and exceptionally large. Originally it was supposed to have several rooms, but the walls were removed from the first floor to create a wider space. The back, south-facing wall has been completely replaced with glass, and beyond the shady cedar, the lawn stretches out to the wide river. A large winding staircase dominates the west side of the room. The walls, soaring

ceilings, wooden floors, and thick carpets are all different shades of white. Waiting to greet us, standing to the left of the door, high up on the floor of a gleaming grand piano, were Melvin's parents.

I have seen Dr. Shezor, of course, but I could not help but be struck again by his youth, his extreme perfection. By his side was Karly, I think, the only person in the family I had never seen before. She had the same pale, beautiful features as the others. Something about her heart-shaped face, her wisps of soft, caramel-colored hair, reminded me of Ing and the silent-film era. He is shorter, and thinner, but less angular, and more rounded than the others. They both casually wear light colors that match the interior of the house. They smiled in welcome but did not take any steps to contact us. I am not trying to scare me, I guess. Melchor, Karly, Melvin's voice broke the short silence, 'This is Lily. You're very welcome, Lily. Melchor measured his step, cautious as he approached me. He temporarily raised his hand, And I continued to shake hands. to him.

Nice. to see you again, doctor, please call me Melchor. Melchor. I smiled at him; my sudden confidence surprised me. I felt the comfort of having Melvin by my side possible. Karly smiled and continued, reaching- out my hand. His cold, stony understanding was just what I expected. It is so nice to meet you,' he said eagerly. Thank you.

Nice to meet you too. And it is like meeting a fairy tale - Snow White, in the flesh.

Where are Naddalin Natalie and Jae? Melvin asked, but no one answered, as they had just appeared at the top of the wide staircase. Hey Melvin! Naddalin Natalie called excitedly. He ran up the stairs, a straight black hair and white skin, and came to a sudden and beautiful stop in front of me. Melchor and Karly warned about that, but I liked it. It was natural to him, anyway. Hi Lily!' said Naddalin Natalie, and she continued to kiss my cheek. If Melchor and Karly had been wary before, they would be trapped now. My eyes twinkled, but I was also happy because she accepted me completely. It was surprising that I found Melvin rigid at my side. I looked at his face, but his expression was unreadable.

You stink, I have never seen it before. No one else knew what to say, and then there was Jae - Tall and Leonine. A feeling of ease spread through me, and I was suddenly relieved, wherever I was. Melvin looked at Jae, raising his eyebrows, and I remembered what Jae could have done. Hello, Lily,' said Jae. He moved away, offering not to shake my hand. But it was impossible for him to feel awkward. Come on, Jae. I smiled shyly at him, and then at the others. 'All of you. hard to meet - you have an incredibly beautiful house,' I added traditionally. Thank you,' said Karly.

'We are so glad you came. He spoke with emotion, and I realized that he thought I was brave.

I also realized that Vivian and Dejen were nowhere to be seen, and I was very innocent of Melvin Denial when I asked him if other people did not like me. Melchor's expression distracted me from this train of thought; he looked at Melvin meaningfully with a deep expression. From the corner of my eye from there, I nodded once to Melvin. I looked away, trying to be polite. My eyes wandered again to the beautiful instrument on the stage near the door. I suddenly remembered my childhood fantasy that, if I won the lottery, I would buy a grand piano for my mother. particularly good - he just plays for himself in our second-hand upright - but I love watching him play. He is happy, absorbed - He's like a bag -or a mysterious being to me, someone outside of the 'mother' persona I take for granted. Let me teach you a lesson, but like most children, I cried until he left me. Karly saw my engagement. Are you playing?' he asked, leaning his head over the piano. I nodded.

'Not at all. But it is nice. Is it yours?' No,' he laughed. Did Melvin not tell you that he is musical? No.' I stared at his suddenly innocent expression with narrowed eyes. 'I should have known, I guess. Karly raised her delicate eyebrows in confusion. Melvin can do

everything, right? I explained. Jae hissed and Karly gave Melvin a scolding look. I hope you do not pretend-that is rude,' he scolded. Just a little,' he laughed freely. Her face softened at the sound, and they shared a brief look that I did not understand, though Karly's face seemed almost grave. She was amazing,

'I did the right thing. Well, game to her,' Karly encouraged. You are just saying it is rude to pretend,' he countered. There are exceptions to every rule,' he replied. I want to hear you play,' I willingly said. It was settled later. Karly pushed him to the piano. He pulled me with him and sat me on the seat next to him. Turned the key Before he gave me a long, eager look.

-And-

Then his fingers quickly swept into the ivory, and the room was filled with such an intricate, exquisite composition, it was impossible to believe in just one set of hands. I lowered my chin. Feeling the drop, my mouth opened wide in surprise, and I heard a low chuckle behind me at my reaction. Melvin looked at me casually, the music still moving around us without stopping, and blinking. 'You like it?' You wrote this?

I continued to breathe. shaking her head. 'This is Karly's favorite. I closed my eyes, shaking my head. What is the problem?' I felt so insignificant. The music slowed down, became softer, and to my surprise, I traced the melody of the lullaby weaving through the scattered notes. You encourage it,' he said softly. The music became unbearably sweet. I could not speak. They want you, you know,' he said in conversation. 'Karly especially. I looked back, but the great room was empty now. Where did they go?' It is quite different that gives us privacy, I guess. I sighed. 'They like me. But Vivian and Dejen...' I trailed off, not sure how to express my doubts. He shuddered.

'Don't worry about Vivian,' he said, his eyes wide and seductive. He will come. I bit my lip in suspicion. 'Dejen?' 'Well, he thinks I am crazy, it is true, but he does not have a problem with you. He tries to reason with Vivian. What is bothering him? answer. He sighed deeply. 'What Vivian struggles with the most... is who we are. It is hard for her to know the truth from the outside. And she is a little jealous.' Is Vivian jealous of me? I asked in disbelief. I tried to imagine a universe where someone as breathless as Vivian would have any probable reason to feel jealous of someone like me. people.' He shuddered. 'He wished he were too. Oh,' I mumbled, still stunned. 'Even Jae, but...' 'It's my fault,' he said.



'I told you he was the latest test of our way of life. I warned him to stay away. I thought about the reason and shivered. Karly and Melchor...?' I continued quickly to stop her from paying attention. Glad to see myself happy.

Karly does not care if you have a third eye and webbed feet. This time she was worried about me, afraid that something was missing from my essential makeup, that Melchor replaced me when I was young... that is ridiculous. Every time I touch you, she chokes with satisfaction. Naddalin Natalie seems so... passionate.' Naddalin Natalie has her way of seeing things,' he said with tight lips. And you are not going to explain it, are you? A moment of wordless communication passed between us. He realized that he knew I knew that he was hiding something from me. I realize that he has nothing to give. Not now.'

So, what did Melchor tell you earlier? His eyebrows knit together. I shivered. 'No doubt.' He looked at me thoughtfully for a few seconds before answering. 'He wants to tell me some news - he does not know if it is something I am going to share with you. Do you want to?' Or you have been overprotective for weeks - and I do not want you to think I am a tyrant. What is wrong?' Nothing wrong, of course. Naddalin Natalie just saw some visitors arriving soon. They know we are here, and they are

interested. Visitor?' 'Of course... Well, they are not like us, of course - in their hunting habits, I mean. They may never make it to town, but I will never let you out of my sight until they are gone.

I shivered. "Finally, a reasonable answer!" he murmured. 'You had no sense of self-preservation. I let him go, looking into the distance, my eyes roamed the wide room again. He followed my gaze. 'Didn't he?' he asked, keeping his voice low. No.' I admitted. No coffin, no pile of skulls in the corners; I did not even think we had houses at home... how depressing for you,' he continued slyly. I ignored his teasing. 'It's too light... too open.' When. He got serious. Then he answered...' This is a place where there is no need to hide. The song he still plays, Ang Akong Awit, drifts towards the end, with the final chords, moved to a more somber key. The last note hovers in the stillness of the silence. 'Thank you,' I murmured. I realized that there were tears in my eyes.

I scolded them in shame. He touched the corner of my eye, flicking the one I remembered. He raised his finger and checked for a drop of moisture. Then, so quickly I was not positive that it was there, he put his finger in his mouth to taste it... I looked at him questioningly, and he turned for a long time to back before the last smile Raha. Do you want to see the rest of the house?' No coffin?' I confirmed, the sarcasm in my

voice not fully disguising the slight but genuine concern I felt. He laughed, took my hand, and led me away from the piano. No casket,' he promised. We walked up the giant staircase, my hand running along the satin-smooth rail. The long hall above the stairs was covered with honey-colored wood, like planks.

'Vivian and Dejen's room...Melchor's office... Naddalin Natalie's room...' He motioned me through the door. He would go on, but I stopped at the end of the hall and stared in disbelief at the ornament hanging on the wall above my head. Melvin smiled at my confused look. 'You can laugh,' he said. 'It's kind of ironic.' I did not laugh. My hand lifted involuntarily and reached out a finger as if to touch the huge wooden cross, the black bronze contrasting with the light-colored walls. I did not touch it, although I was curious if the old wood would be as silky as it looks. 'It must be very old,' I guessed. He shrugged. 'Early thirties.' I took my eyes off the cross and stared at it. 'Why did you put it here? I wondered, 'Nostalgia. It belonged to Melchor's father.' 'Does he collect antiques?' I suggested skeptically- 'No. He carved it himself. It hangs on the wall above the parish pulpit where he preached. 'I am not sure if my expression betrayed my shock, but I looked back at the simple and ancient cross, just in case. I did mental arithmetic quickly; the cross is over three

hundred and seventy years old.' The silence stretched as I struggled to think about the concept for so many years. 'Are you all, right?' He looked worried. 'How old is Melchor?' I ignored his question, still staring, and asked silently, 'He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty-second birthday,' Melvin said. I looked back a million times and the problem were in my eyes. He looked at me carefully as he said, 'He believes that Melchor was born in London in the '60s.

The time was not that precise back then, anyway, for the average person. That was before Cromwell, though. 'I kept my composure, aware of his scrutiny as I listened. 'He was the only son of an Anglican priest. His mother died when he was born. His father was an intolerant man. When the Protestants came to power, he was passionate about his faith. 'The persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions. He also believed very strongly in the realities of evil. He hunted down witches, werewolves... and vampires.' I grew up very firm on that word. I am sure he noticed, but he did not pause and continued.

'They burned a lot of innocent people and the real creature he was looking for wasn't so easy to catch.' As the priest got older, He put his obedient son in charge of the raid. At first, Melchor was disappointed. He was not in a hurry to accuse him and went to see those demons that did not

exist. But he was more persistent and smarter than his father. He found a group of actual vampires who were hiding in the city's sewers and only going out to hunt at night. Back then, when monsters were more than myths and legends, that was the way of life for many. 'Of course, people picked up pitch forks and torches.'--his brief laugh grew darker now--'and then waited for Melchor down the street where he saw the monster. Eventually one showed up.' His sound is quiet. 'He must be old and frail. Melchor smells the crowd and hears him yelling at the others in Latin. He runs across the street and Melchor - he is twenty-three.' And amazingly fast - leads the chase. The creature overtook them easily, but Melchor thought it was too hungry, so he turned and attacked. He fell on Melchor first, but the others were close, and he turned to defend himself. He killed two people and got there.

'Fleeing with a third party, leaving Melchor bleeding in the street. He stopped. I feel like he was adjusting something to get me something.' Melchor knew what his father would do. Corpses will be burned - anything infected by the monster must be destroyed. Melchor instinctively acted to save his life. He crept out of the alley as the crowd followed the devil and his victims. He hid in the cellar and buried himself in rotting potatoes for three days. It is a miracle that he was able to remain

silent and remain unknown. 'I do not know what my face was showing, but it came off suddenly. 'How do you feel?' church. I am fine, 'I assured him.

-And-

Even though I bit my lip hesitantly, he must have seen the curiosity in my eyes. He smiled. I hope you have a few more questions for me.' Rarely.' His smile spread over his bright teeth. He took my hand and left the hall. 'Come on, then,' he encouraged. 'I will tell you.

## 16 MELCHOR

He took me back to what Melchor called his office. He stood outside the door for a moment. 'Come in,' Melchor's voice invited. Melvin opened the door to a high-ceilinged bedroom with a tall west-facing window. The back wall is covered with dark wood - where it can be seen. Most of the wall space was taken up by tall bookshelves that towered over my head and held more books than I had ever seen outside of a library. Melchor sat in a leather chair behind a large red desk. He just marked the pages of the thick volume he held. The room was exactly what I had always imagined a college principal would look like - only Melchor looked too young to fit. 'What can I do for you?'

he asked happily, standing up from his seat. 'I want to tell Lily some of our stories,' Melvin said. Your story. 'We did not mean to bother you,' 'I am sorry. Not quite. Where do you start?' Wagoner,' Melvin answered putting the light on my shoulder and turning me towards the door we had just entered. Every time he touches me, even in the most casual way, my heart responds. Melchor was acting strangely there. The wall we are facing today is different from the others. Instead of books, this wall is filled with paintings of all sizes, some in bright colors, others in dull monochrome. I was looking for some reason, some common motif connection for the collection, but my quick search did not find it. Melvin pulled me to the left, standing in front of a small square oil painting in a simple wooden frame. It does not happen on bigger and brighter things; painted in different shades of sepia, it depicts a small town with steep roofs, with towers on top of several towers. The first floor has a wide river around a bridge covered with buildings that look like small cathedrals. London in the 1950s, 'said Melvin. The London of my youth,' added Carlyle a few meters behind us. I refused; I did not hear it coming. Melvin squeezed my hand, 'Are you going to talk?' Melvin asked.

I turned slightly to see Melchor's reaction. He met my gaze and smiled. 'I want to,' he replied. 'But to be honest I am a little late. The

hospital called this morning - Dr. Snow is having a sick day. Besides, you know the story as well as I do,' he added, now smiling at Melvin. It is a different story - the daily worries of a city doctor who is in the middle of a debate about his early days in 17th century London. It was also fear-wracking to know that he was only speaking aloud for my benefit. After the others smiled at me, Melchor left the room. I stared at the small picture of Melchor city for a long time, 'What's next? I asked Melvin who was looking at me. 'When did he find out what happened to him?' He looked at the pictures again, and I saw which pictures piqued his interest. It is the bigger part of the autumn colors - space.

'When he saw what was going on,' Melvin said quietly, 'he fought it. He tried to destroy himself. But that is not easy to do.' 'What's going on?' I did not want to say it aloud, but this word surprised me, 'He jumped from a good height,' Melvin said in a deep voice. 'He tried to drown himself in the ocean... but he was too young and too strong for a new life. Amazingly, he fought at such an early age... he fed... Instinct stronger, then he took.

Everything on his own, but he was rejected by himself to have the strength to try to starve to death. Is it possible? 'My voice is weak: 'No, there is extraordinarily little that will kill us. I opened my mouth to ask,



but he said in front of me: 'That's why he is so hungry, and that is why he is drunk strength. six months. At night, looking for the loneliest place, hating himself. The bad wolf he was afraid of, didn't he eat meat in his previous life? In the next month, his new thinking appeared, he could live without ghosts, see himself. and' use his time well. He is always intelligent, and eager to learn.

Now he has unlimited time ahead of him. He studies at night and prepares during the day. He swims in France and - 'He swims in France?' 'People always swim in the English Channel, Lily, ' he told me patiently. Yes, I think. It sounds funny in that context. Go ahead.'

'Swimming is easy - 'Everything is easy for you,' I catch. He waits, he talks funny.' I will not interrupt again, I promise: 'He laughed and finished his sentence.' Because, technically, we do not need to breathe.' You - 'No, no, you promised.' He laughed, putting a cold finger on my lips. 'Do you want to hear the story or not?' 'You can't hit me like that and expect me not to say anything,' I complained to his finger. He put his hand on my neck. My heartbeat in response, but I said, 'You should not breathe?' I asked, 'No, you are not. It is just a habit.' He shrugged.

'How long have you been breathing?' 'Forever, I think; I do not know. A little uncomfortable - bad.' 'A little uncomfortable,' I said. I did

not care about my expression, but there was something in his darkness. He put his hand on it. side and stand up, his eyes looked at my face. The silence stretched. His features are still stone. 'What is it?' I whispered, touching his face changed. He softened. into my arms and sighed. 'I have been waiting for this to happen.' 'Why?' 'I know that sometimes I must tell you something or something that you see happening. Then you ran away from me screaming as you walked.' He smiled half-smiling, but his eyes were profoundly serious.

'You cannot stop me. I want this to happen because I want you to be at peace. I still want to be with you. The two thoughts cannot be reconciled...' He looked at me and walked away. I waited. 'I'm not running anywhere,' I promise. See you later,' he said and smiled again. I do not like it.' So forward-Melchor swimming in France. 'He went back to his story, he stopped. Thinking, his eyes looked at another picture - a storm. more colorful. luxuriously framed by all, and the greatest; it is twice as wide as the door hanging on the side of the canvas. The bright images of the robes swirling around the large stones and the balcony., and medicine at night and called himself, his penance, in this, save people's lives.' He taught perfectly. come, almost good. 'I cannot explain the exit enough; it took him two hundred years of challenging work to maintain his perfect self.

Now he just smells human blood and can do what he wants without suffering. He found so much peace there, going to the hospital...'

Melvin investigated space for a long time. He suddenly remembered his purpose. She touched her finger on the big picture in front of us: 'She studied in Italy and found others there. They have more wisdom and education than the women in the ruler's water in London.' He touched the quartet at a high price, painted on the upper balcony, calmly watching the chaos below them. that I know the golden-haired man: 'Solimene Melchor is inspired by her friends. She always pulls them as gods or fallen angels,' laughs Melvin. 'Mazel, Ava, Leah,' he said, pointing to the other three, two with black hair, one white as snow. 'Nocturnal patrons of art.' 'What happened to them?' With my finger an inch from the picture on the canvas, I thought aloud, 'They're still there.' He shrugged. 'Who knows how many millennials. Carlyle was with them for a brief time, only a few years. He was proud of their progress and kindness, but they tried to correct him of his denial of the place of 'Food,' as they called it.

They tried to convince him, and he tried to convince them but failed. At this time, Carlyle decided to try the New World. He wants to find someone like him. He is very lonely, you see. 'He has not seen anyone

for a long time. However, as the animals became subjects of the fairies, he found that he was able to communicate with humans without faith as if they were one of his own. He started training in medicine. But the company he wants to avoid, he cannot risk the people know. He had an idea floating in his head for years and almost decided to do it - because he could not find it. he will be a woman. He did not know exactly how his conversion happened, so he refused.

And he is afraid to steal the life of anyone like him. There is no hope for me; I am in a church with dead people. He takes care of my parents and knows that I am alone. He decided to try...' His voice, a smile, trailed off. He was looking out the west window. I wonder what images fill his mind right now, memories of Melchor or himself. I waited in silence. turned to me 'So we came full,' he said, a beautiful smile. 'So, you win against Melchor? Always.' I looked at the wall of pictures and wondered if I could hear more stories, Melvin did not say anything as he walked into the room, so I asked: 'Almost?'

He sighed as if he did not want to. answer, please call me not sold on his abstinent lifestyle and upset him for controlling my appetite, so I walked for a while. 'Really?' I wanted to know too much to be afraid, I should. around Me. not holding back. you?' 'No. 'Why. doesn't it?' 'I

think... seems reasonable.' He laughed louder than before. We were now at the top of the stairs, in another paneled corridor. 'Since I was born,' he complained, 'Everyone around me, people and I have benefited from the knowledge of all that non-humans have thought. It took ten years to fight Melchor: I read it in fairness. understand why he lived the way he did. It just took me a few years to go back to Melchor and reconnect with his vision. of my victim, I can offend innocent people and only seek evil. I would not be different if I were in the dark street where he chased and saved 'I shuddered as I vividly thought of what he described: the dark street, The scared woman, the black man behind him. And Edoardo, when Edoardo sought, terrible and noble like a young god, could not stop.

Thank you, or more before? 'But as time passed, I saw the ghost in my eyes. I cannot erase the debt of so many lives lost, no matter how necessary. And I went back to Melchor and Karly. I got back to making more money. still, what I deserve.' We stopped at the door at the end of the house. My room,' he told me, opened it, and pulled me inside.

His room faced south, with a window the size of a wall like the great room below. The entire back of the house must be glass. His attitude was despised Monongahela River injured, unexpectedly across the forest to the Olympic range. The mountains were closer than I thought.

The west wall was completely covered with shelf after shelf of CDs. His room was nicer than a music store. In the corner was a high-end sound system, the kind I was afraid to touch because I was sure I would break something.

There was no bed, only a wide and attractive black leather sofa. The floor was covered with a thick golden carpet, and the walls were hung with heavy fabrics in a slightly darker shade.' Sound good?' I suppose. He shrugged and shook his head. He took the remote control and turned on the stereo. It was quiet, but the soft jazz number was like a band in our room. I went to check out his amazing music collection.' How did you manage this one?' I asked, I could not find a rhyme or reason for the theme. He did not pay attention. 'Um, for a year, and then by personal choice within the system,' he said absently. I turned around, and he looked at me with a sad look in his eyes.' What?' 'I was happy to feel...relief. Since you know everything, you do not have to keep secrets to yourself. I could feel more than that. I love it. It makes me...happy.'

He took a breath while smiling a little, 'I'm happy,' I replied with a smile. I would be worried that he would regret telling me these things. It is a good thing it was not. But then, as his eyes caught my words, his smile disappeared, and his face froze. 'You're still waiting to run and

cry, aren't you?' I suppose. A faint smile touched his lips, and he nodded. 'I hate to break your light bulb, but you are not as scary as you think. I do not think you are scary at all,' I said. Normal. He paused, furrowing his brows in disbelief. Then he gave a wide evil smile. 'You really shouldn't have said that' he whispered. He growled, a faint sound in the back of his throat; her lips curled over her perfect teeth.

His body suddenly moved, he was half bent, like a lion about to pounce. I turned my back on him and shouted. 'You could not. I did not see him fly - he was so fast. I was suddenly in the air, then we hit the sofa, hit the wall. All the while, his arms formed a protective iron cage around me - I shook so much. But I was still breathing as I tried to straighten myself. He did not have it. He rolled me into a ball against his chest, and I was stronger than iron chains. I stared at him in surprise, but he was well below control, his jaw dropped, and he smiled, his eyes cheerful but humorous.' he growled playfully.'

That you are such a horrible monster,' I said, my pain muffled a little by my breathless voice.' Better,' he admitted.' I was struggling. 'Can I get up now?' He smiled. but.' 'Can we get in?' came a soft voice from the hall. I struggled to pull away, but Melvin just readjusted me, so I was more comfortable on his lap. All I saw was Naddalin Natalie, then, with

Jae behind her in the doorway. My cheeks burned, but Melvin seemed to calm down.'

Melvin still laughed quietly. Naddalin Natalie found nothing unusual in our reception; he walked dancing, his movements graceful, to the center of the room, where he returned to sink to the floor. However, Jae was standing in the doorway, his expression slightly surprised. She looked at Melvin's face, wondering if he was tasting heaven with his unusual sensitivity. 'You looked like you Lily had for lunch, and we came to see if you wanted to share,' Naddalin Natalie announced. I froze for a moment, until I realized Melvin was smiling-whether it was at his comment or my reaction, I could not tell. 'I am sorry, I do not think I have enough,' he replied., his hands and I locked carelessly.

'Actually,' Jae said, smiling despite himself as he walked into the room, 'Naddalin Natalie says that tonight there is a real storm coming, and Dejen plays ball. What is the game?' The words were familiar enough, but the context confused me. However, I noticed that Naddalin Natalie was more believable than the weathercaster. Melvin's eyes lit up, but he hesitated. 'Of course, you have to bring Lily,' shouted Naddalin Natalie. I thought I saw Jae give her a quick glance.



'Do you want to go?' Melvin asked me, excited, his expression sharp.' For sure. I could not give up such a face. 'Um, where are we going?' 'We'll have to wait for the thunder to play ball-you'll see why,' he promised. 'Will I need an umbrella?' All three laughed aloud.' What? Jae asked Naddalin Natalie.' He was positive. 'The storm will hit the city. It must be very dry in the rain.' Good, then.' The passion in Jae's voice was of course captivating. I was curious myself, instead of scared.' We will see if Melchor comes.' Naddalin Natalie stood up and headed for the door in a way that would break any Bellina's heart. If you do not know,' Jae whispered, and they were quickly on their way. Jae closed the door nonchalantly behind her.' What are we going to play?' I asked. 'You'll see,' Melvin explained. 'We will play Kickball.' I rolled my eyes. 'Vampires like Kickball?' 'It's America's game,' he said with mock respect.

## 17 MELCHOR

He took me back to what Melchor called his office. He stood outside the door for a moment. 'Come in,' Melchor's voice said. Melvin opened the door to a high-ceilinged bedroom with a tall west-facing window. The back wall is covered with dark wood - where it can be seen.

Most of the wall space was taken up by tall bookshelves that towered over my head and held more books than I had ever seen outside of

a library. Melchor sat in a leather chair behind a large red desk. He just marked the pages of the thick volume he held. The room was exactly what I had always imagined a college principal would look like - only Melchor looked too young to fit. 'What can I do for you?' - he asked happily, standing up from his seat. 'I want to tell Lily some of our stories,' Melvin said. Your story. 'We did not mean to bother you,' 'I am sorry. Not quite. Where do you start?' Wagoner,' Melvin answered putting the light on my shoulder and turning me towards the door we had just entered. Every time he touches me, even in the most casual way, my heart responds. Melchor was acting strangely there.

The wall we are facing today is different from the others. Instead of books, this wall is filled with paintings of all sizes, some in bright colors, others in dull monochrome. I was looking for some reason, some common motif connection for the collection, but my quick search did not find it. Melvin pulled me to the left, standing in front of a small square oil painting in a simple wooden frame. It does not happen on bigger and brighter things; painted in different shades of sepia, it depicts a small town with steep roofs, with towers on top of several towers. The first floor has a wide river around a bridge covered with buildings that look like small cathedrals. London in the 1950s, 'said Melvin. The London of my

youth,' added Carlyle a few meters behind us. I refused; I did not hear it coming. Melvin squeezed my hand, 'Are you going to talk?' Melvin asked.

I turned slightly to see Melchor's reaction. He met my gaze and smiled. 'I want to,' he replied. 'But to be honest I am a little late. The hospital called this morning - Dr. Snow is having a sick day. Besides, you know the story as well as I do,' he added, now smiling at Melvin. It is a different story - the daily worries of a city doctor who is in the middle of a debate about his early days in 17th century London. It was also fear-wracking to know that he was only speaking aloud for my benefit. After the others smiled at me, Melchor left the room. I stared at the small picture of Melchor city for a long time, 'What's next? I asked Melvin who was looking at me.

'When did he find out what happened to him?' He looked at the pictures again, and I saw which pictures piqued his interest. It is the bigger part of the autumn colors - the empty space. 'When he saw what was going on,' Melvin said quietly, 'he fought it. He tried to destroy himself. But that is not easy to do.' 'What's going on?' I did not want to say it aloud, but this word surprised me, 'He jumped from a good height,' Melvin said in a deep voice. 'He tried to drown himself in the ocean... but he was too young and too strong for a new life. Amazingly, he fought at

such an early age... he fed... Instinct stronger, then he took. Everything on his own, but he was rejected by himself to have the strength to try to starve to death. Is it possible?

'My voice is weak: 'No, there is extraordinarily little that will kill us. I opened my mouth to ask, but he said in front of me: 'That's why he is so hungry, and that is why he is drunk strength. six months. At night, looking for the loneliest place, hating himself. The bad wolf he was afraid of, didn't he eat meat in his previous life? In the next month, his new thinking appeared, he could live without ghosts, see himself. and' use his time well. He is always intelligent, and eager to learn. Now he has unlimited time ahead of him. He studies at night and prepares during the day. He swims in France and - 'He swims in France?'

'People always swim in the English Channel, Lily, ' he told me patiently. Yes, I think. It sounds funny in that context. Go ahead.'

'Swimming is easy - 'Everything is easy for you,' I catch. He waits, he talks funny.' I will not interrupt again, I promise: 'He laughed and finished his sentence.' Because, technically, we do not need to breathe.' You - 'No, no, you promised.' He laughed, putting a cold finger on my lips. 'Do you want to hear the story or not?' 'You can't hit me like that and expect me not to say anything,' I complained to his finger. He put his hand on my neck.

My heartbeat in response, but I said, 'You should not breathe?' I asked, 'No, you are not. It is just a habit.' He shrugged. 'How long have you been breathing?' 'Forever, I think; I do not know. A little uncomfortable - bad.' 'A little uncomfortable,' I said. I did not care about my expression, but there was something in his darkness. He put his hand on it. side and stand up, his eyes looked at my face. The silence stretched. His features are still stone.

'What is it?' I whispered, touching his face changed. He softened. into my arms and sighed. 'I have been waiting for this to happen.'

'Why?'

'I know that sometimes I must tell you something or something that you see happening. Then you ran away from me screaming as you walked.' He smiled half-smiling, but his eyes were profoundly serious. 'You cannot stop me. I want this to happen because I want you to be at peace. I still want to be with you. The two thoughts cannot be reconciled ...' He looked at me and walked away. I waited. 'I'm not running anywhere,' I promise. See you later,' he said and smiled again. I do not like it.' So forward-Melchor swimming in France. 'He went back to his story, he stopped. Thinking, his eyes looked at another picture - a storm. more colorful. luxuriously framed by all, and the greatest; it is twice as wide as

the door hanging on the side of the canvas. The bright images of the robes swirling around the large stones and the balcony., and medicine at night and called himself, his penance, in this, save people's lives.' He taught perfectly. come, almost good.

'I cannot explain the exit enough; it took him two hundred years of challenging work to maintain his perfect self. Now he just smells human blood and can do what he wants without suffering. He found so much peace there, going to the hospital...' Melvin investigated space for a long time. He suddenly remembered his purpose. She touched her finger on the big picture in front of us: 'She studied in Italy and found others there. They have more wisdom and education than the women in the ruler's water in London.' He touched the quartet at a high price, painted on the upper balcony, calmly watching the chaos below them. that I know the golden-haired man: 'Solimene Melchor is inspired by her friends. She always pulls them as gods,' laughs Melvin. 'Mazel, Ava, Leah,' he said, pointing to the other three, two with black hair, one white as snow. 'Nocturnal patrons of art.' 'What happened to them?' With my finger an inch from the picture on the canvas, I thought aloud, 'They're still there.' He shrugged.

'Who knows how many millennials. Carlyle was with them for a brief time, only a few years. He was proud of their progress and kindness, but they tried to correct him of his denial of the place of 'Food,' as they called it. They tried to convince him, and he tried to convince them but failed. At this time, Carlyle decided to try the New World. He wants to find someone like him. He is very lonely, you see. 'He has not seen anyone for a long time. However, as the animals became subjects of the fairies, he found that he was able to communicate with humans without faith as if they were one of his own. He started training in medicine. But the company he wants to avoid, he cannot risk the people know.

He had an idea floating in his head for years and almost decided to do it - because he could not find it. he will be a woman. He did not know exactly how his conversion happened, so he refused. And he is afraid to steal the life of anyone like him. There is no hope for me; I am in a church with dead people. He takes care of my parents and knows that I am alone. He decided to try...' His voice, a smile, trailed off. He was looking out the west window. I wonder what images fill his mind right now, memories of Melchor or himself. I waited in silence. 'So, we came full,' he said, a beautiful smile.

'So, you win against Melchor? Always.' I looked at the wall of pictures and wondered if I could hear more stories, Melvin did not say anything as he walked into the room, so I asked: 'Almost?' He sighed as if he did not want to. answer, please call me not sold on his abstinent lifestyle and upset him for controlling my appetite, so I walked for a while. 'Really?' I wanted to know too much to be afraid, I should. around Me. not holding back. you?' 'No. 'Why. doesn't it?' 'I think... seems reasonable.' He laughed louder than before. We were now at the top of the stairs, in another paneled corridor. 'Since I was born,' he complained, 'Everyone around me, people and I have benefited from the knowledge of all that non-humans have thought. It took ten years to fight Melchor: I read it in fairness. understand why he lived the way he did. It just took me a few years to go back to Melchor and reconnect with his vision. of my victim, I can offend innocent people and only seek evil. I would not be different if I were in the dark street where he chased and saved.

'I shuddered as I vividly thought of what he described: the dark street, The scared woman, the black man behind him. And Edoardo, when Edoardo sought, terrible and noble like a young god, could not stop. Thank you, or more before? 'But as time passed, I saw the ghost in my eyes. I cannot erase the debt of so many lives lost, no matter how



necessary. And I went back to Melchor and Karly. I got back to making more money. still, what I deserve.' We stopped at the door at the end of the house. My room,' he told me, opened it, and pulled me inside.

His room faced south, with a window the size of a wall like the great room below. The entire back of the house must be glass. His attitude was despised Monongahela River injured, unexpectedly across the forest to the Olympic range. The mountains were closer than I thought. The west wall was completely covered with shelf after shelf of CDs. His room was nicer than a music store. In the corner was a high-end sound system, the kind I was afraid to touch because I was sure I would break something. There was no bed, only a wide and attractive black leather sofa.

The floor was covered with a thick golden carpet, and the walls were hung with heavy fabrics in a slightly darker shade.' Sound good?' I suppose. He shrugged and shook his head. He took the remote control and turned on the stereo. It was quiet, but the soft jazz number was like a band in our room. I went to check out his amazing music collection.'

How did you manage this one?' I asked, I could not find a rhyme or reason for the theme. He did not pay attention. 'Um, for a year, and then by personal choice within the system,' he said absently. I turned

around, and he looked at me with a sad look in his eyes. 'What?' 'I was happy to feel...relief. Since you know everything, you do not have to keep secrets to yourself. I could feel more than that. I love it. It makes me...happy.' He took a breath while smiling a little, 'I'm happy,' I replied with a smile. I would be worried that he would regret telling me these things. It is a good thing it was not. But then, as his eyes caught my words, his smile disappeared, and his face froze.

'You're still waiting to run and cry, aren't you?' I suppose. A faint smile touched his lips, and he nodded. 'I hate to break your light bulb, but you are not as scary as you think. I do not think you are scary at all,' I said. Normal. He paused, furrowing his brows in disbelief. Then he gave a wide evil smile. 'You really shouldn't have said that' he whispered.

He growled, a faint sound in the back of his throat; her lips curled over her perfect teeth. His body suddenly moved, he was half bent, like a lion about to pounce. I turned my back on him and shouted. 'You could not. I did not see him fly - he was so fast. I was suddenly in the air, then we hit the sofa, hit the wall. All the while, his arms formed a protective iron cage around me - I shook so much. But I was still breathing as I tried to straighten myself. He did not have it. He rolled me into a ball against his chest, and I was stronger than iron chains. I stared at him in

surprise, but he was well below control, his jaw dropped, and he smiled, his eyes cheerful but humorous.'

He growled playfully.' That you are such a horrible monster,' I said, my pain muffled a little by my breathless voice.' Better,' he admitted.' I was struggling. 'Can I get up now?' He smiled. but.' 'Can we get in?' came a soft voice from the hall. I struggled to pull away, but Melvin just readjusted me, so I was more comfortable on his lap. All I saw was Naddalin Natalie, then, with Jae behind her in the doorway. My cheeks burned, but Melvin seemed to calm down.' Melvin still laughed quietly. Naddalin Natalie found nothing unusual in our reception; he walked dancing, his movements graceful, to the center of the room, where he returned to sink to the floor.

However, Jae was standing in the doorway, his expression slightly surprised. She looked at Melvin's face, wondering if he was tasting heaven with his unusual sensitivity. 'You looked like you Lily had for lunch, and we came to see if you wanted to share,' Naddalin Natalie announced. I froze for a moment, until I realized Melvin was smiling- whether it was at his comment or my reaction, I could not tell.' I am sorry, I do not think I have enough,' he replied., his hands and I locked carelessly. 'Actually,' Jae said, smiling despite himself as he walked into

the room, 'Naddalin Natalie says that tonight there is a real storm coming, and Dejen plays ball. What is the game?' The words were familiar enough, but the context confused me. However, I noticed that Naddalin Natalie was more believable than the weathercaster. Melvin's eyes lit up, but he hesitated. 'Of course, you have to bring Lily,' shouted Naddalin Natalie. I thought I saw Jae give her a quick glance.

'Do you want to go?' Melvin asked me, excited, his expression sharp.' For sure. I could not give up such a face. 'Um, where are we going?' 'We'll have to wait for the thunder to play ball-you'll see why,' he promised. 'Will I need an umbrella?' All three laughed aloud.' What? Jae asked Naddalin Natalie.' He was positive. 'The storm will hit the city. It must be very dry in the rain.' Good, then.' The passion in Jae's voice was of course captivating. I was curious myself, instead of scared.' We will see if Melchor comes.' Naddalin Natalie stood up and headed for the door in a way that would break any Bellina's heart. If you do not know,' Jae whispered, and they were quickly on their way. Jae closed the door nonchalantly behind her.' What are we going to play?' I asked. 'You'll see,' Melvin explained. 'We will play Kickball.' I rolled my eyes. 'Vampires like Kickball?' 'It's America's game,' he said with mock respect.

## 18 THURSDAY

It was starting to rain when Melvin turned onto my driveway. Until then, I did not doubt that he would be with me when I was only playing a few games in the real world.

-And-

Then I saw a black car, a disheveled Ford, parked in Charlie's driveway - and I heard Melvin muttering something inaudible in a low, angry voice. Leaning away from the rain on the shallow porch, Chiaz Naztherth stood behind his father's wheelchair. Billy's face was stone-faced as Melvin pulled my car over to the side of the road. Chiaz looked; his face sad. Melvin's voice was incredibly angry. 'It crosses the line.' 'He came to warn Charlie?' I thought, more horrified than angry. Melvin just nodded, replying to Billy staring into the rain with teary eyes. Leave me alone,' I replied. Melvin's black light worried me.

I was surprised that he agreed. 'C 'That's good. Be careful, the kid does not know.' I was a little shaken by the word child. 'Chiaz isn't much younger than me,' I reminded him. He looked at me, his anger suddenly gone. 'Oh, I know,' he assured me with a smile. I sighed and put my hand on the door. 'Come in,' he instructed, 'so I can go, I'll be back in the evening.' » Do you want my car? I offered, wondering how to explain

it to Charlie. 'I can walk home faster than this car can go.' 'You don't have to leave,' I said sadly. He smiled at my frustration. 'I do. When you get rid of it' - he threw a dark look at the black people - 'you must prepare Charlie to meet your new boyfriend. He smiled widely, showing all his teeth. I groaned.

'Thank you very much. He smiled that crooked smile I love. 'I'll be back soon,' he promised. His eyes returned to the balcony, then he leaned down to kiss me quickly on the bottom of my jaw. My heart was pounding, and I looked out onto the balcony. Billy's face It was no longer a crime, and his hands gripped his seat. Soon, 'I nodded and opened the door and stepped out into the rain. I felt his eyes on my back as I passed between the lights that lit the balcony. Bye, Billy. Hello Chiaz. I received them warmly. 'Charlie's gone for the day - I hope you didn't wait too long.' 'Soon,' said Billy modestly. His black eyes were piercing. 'I just wanted to say that.'

He pointed to the brown paper bag on his forehead. Thank you,' I said, even though I had no idea what it might be. 'Why don't you just come over for a minute and dry it off?' I acted like I was not being searched when I opened the door and waved to them in front of me. Here, let me get this,' I offered, turning to close the door. I let him take one last

look at Melvin. He waited, quietly, his eyes reverent. You will want to put it in the fridge,' said Billy, handing me the package.

'It's part of Harry Clearwater's Homemade Fish Fry - Charlie's favorite.' The refrigerator keeps it dry. He nodded. Thank you,' I repeated, but with emotion this time- 'I was running out of new ways to prepare fish, and he should bring more home tonight. » Fishing again? Billy asked with a twinkle in his eye. 'Under the usual place?' I should run if I see him.' 'No,' I lied quickly, my face tightening.

'He was going somewhere... but I do not know where. it made him think better.' Jake,' he said, still looking at me, 'Why don't you get Becky's new picture out of the car? I leave it to Charlie.' Where are they? I looked at him, but he was looking down, his eyebrows coming together. I saw him in the trunk,' Billy said, 'You can dig that up. Chiaz dug the rain. Billy and I looked at each other in silence. After a few seconds the silence became awkward, I turned and walked towards me, heading into the kitchen. I could hear his wet wheels hitting the linoleum as he followed. The bag climbed onto the top shelf of the fridge and walked away.

He went around to meet him. His deeply lined face was unreadable. Charlie will not be back for a long time. My words were almost rude. He nodded in agreement but said nothing. Thanks again for

the fish fry,' I pointed. He continued to shake his head. I sighed and crossed my arms over my chest. I had left out small matters. 'Lily,' he said, then hesitated. I waited. Lily, said, Charlie, is one of my best friends. Yes. He enunciated each word carefully in his strong voice. 'I see you have been spending time together with one of the Shezor.

'Yes,' I repeated dryly. His eyes narrowed. 'It is none of my business, but I do not think it is such a clever idea. 'You're right,' I agreed. 'It is none of your business. He raised his gray eyebrows at my words. 'You do not know this, but the Shezor family has a bad reputation in this place. 'I did,' I told him in a harsh tone. This surprised him. But we cannot get that reputation, can we? Because the Shezor have never set foot on the reservation, have they? I saw my faintest reminder of the bond they both built and protected his tribe pulled at him. True,' he ran, his eyes alert. 'You seem... knowledgeable about the Shezor.' More knowledgeable than I expected. I looked at him.

'And 'More knowledgeable than you. He pursed his thick lips at the thought. 'Perhaps,' he allowed, but his eyes were wary. 'Does Charlie know?' He found a weakness in my armor. 'Charlie loves the Shezor,' I said. He understood my escape perfectly. my story,' he said. 'But maybe



it's Charlie.' 'Even though it's my business, again, I guess it's Charlie's business, right?'

I wondered if he even understood my question because I was trying not to say anything incriminating. He thought about this while the rain was hitting the roof, the only sound that disturbed the silence.' Yes,' he finally agreed. 'I guess that's your job too.' I sighed in peace. 'Thank you, Billy. 'Just think about what you're doing, Lily,' he urged. Well, I quickly agreed. He frowned. 'I mean, do not do what you are doing. I looked into his eyes, filled with nothing but concern for me, and there was nothing I could say. Immediately the front door slammed, and I jumped at the sound. There are no pictures anywhere in this car. Chiaz's mumbled voice reached us before he did.

The shoulders of his shirt were stained with rain, and his hair was dripping as he rounded the corner. Hmm,' Billy got angry, pulled away, and turned his chair to face his son. 'I left it at home. Chiaz rolled his eyes in surprise. 'Okay, Lily, tell Charlie' - Billy paused before continuing - 'that we stopped, I mean.' I will, I whispered. Chiaz was surprised. 'Are we going already?' 'Charlie's out late,' Billy explained as he passed Chiaz. Ah! Chiaz looked upset. 'Well, I'll see you next time, Lily.' Yes, I agreed. Be careful,' Billy warned me. I did not answer. Chiaz

helped his father. I waved a little, quickly looked at my empty car, then closed the door before they left. I stood in the hallway for a minute, listening to the sound of their car as it pulled up and drove off. I stayed where I was, waiting for the anger and anxiety to pass. After the tension subsided a little, I went upstairs to change my clothes.

I have tried a few different tips, but I am not sure what to expect tonight. As I focused on the future, what had just happened became less important. Now that I was removed from Jae and Melvin's influence, I began to take revenge for not being afraid before. I quickly gave up on choosing an outfit-discarding the old flannel shirt and jeans-knowing I would be in my raincoat all night. The phone rang and I ran downstairs to pick it up. There was only one voice I wanted to hear; anything else would be offensive. But I knew that if he wanted to talk to me, he could show up in my room. 'Hello?' I asked breathlessly. Lily? It is me,' Charity-Anna said. Oh, hey, Anny.

I struggled for a moment to come back to reality. It felt like months instead of days before I talked to Anny. 'How was the dance?' It was so much fun.! Charity-Anna ran. Not needing any further instruction, she began to describe the last night minute by minute. But it was not easy to focus on Charity-Anna, Buddy, the dance, the school - they all seemed

incomprehensible while my eyes were staring out the window, trying to judge the size of the light behind the heavy clouds.' Did you hear what I said, Lily?' Anny asked angrily. 'I'm sorry, what?' I said, "Buddy, kissed me! Can you believe it?" 'That's amazing, Anny,' I said, 'So what did you do yesterday?' Charity-Anna protested, still looking worried because I was not interested. Nothing. I just went outside to enjoy the sun. I heard Charlie's car in the garage. 'Have you heard anything else from Melvin Shezor?'

The front door closed, and I heard Charlie knocking at the bottom of the stairs. to put his gears. 'Um I'm late, I can't remember what my story was.' Hi, kiddo!' Charlie called to me as he went to the kitchen. I waved at him. Anny heard his voice. 'Oh, your father. here. Do not worry, we will talk tomorrow. See you at Trig.' 'See you, Anny. I hung up. Hey, dad, I say. He was rubbing his hands in the sink. 'Where's the fish?' 'I have put it in the freezer. I am going to get a few pieces before they dry out - Billy brought down some Harry Clearwater fish this evening. I worked to look happy. He did that?' Charlie's eyes lit up.

'It is my favorite. Charlie cleaned up and made dinner. Before long we were sitting at the table, eating in silence. Charlie enjoyed his meal. I was very confused about how to accomplish my task, and I

struggled to find a way to answer this question. 'What did you do to yourself today?' he asked, taking my mouth out. Well, this afternoon I was wandering around the house...' The latest episode of this evening. I tried to keep my voice clear, but my stomach was empty. 'And this morning I was at the Shezor. Charlie dropped his fork. The place of Dr. Shezor? he asked in surprise. I acted like I did not see what he did. 'Yeah.' 'What were you doing there?'

He had not picked up his fork.' Well, I dated Melvin Shezor tonight, and he wanted me to introduce him to his parents... Dad? 'It looked like Charlie had an aneurysm. 'Dad, are you okay?' 'Are you dating Melvin Shezor?' , he exclaimed. Uh-oh. 'I thought you liked the Shezor.' 'He's too old for you,' he pushed. We are all teenagers,' I corrected, even though he was more right than he was. I thought so. Wait...' He paused. and Edwin?' Melvin is the last one, with brown hair. Beautiful, Divine...' 'Oh, well, that's it.' - he struggled, - 'well, I think. I do not like the look of this old man. I am sure he is a nice guy and all, but he also seems...mature to you. Is this Edwin your boyfriend?'

'It's Melvin, daddy.' 'Is he?' 'In a way, I guess.' You said last night you were not interested in any of the boys in town. But he picked up his fork again, so I thought the worst was over. Yes. Melvin's out of town,

man. He gave me a scornful look as he chewed. And yet, I went on, just started a little, you know. Do not embarrass me with all the dating talk, okay?' 'When will they come?' 'He'll be here in a few minutes.' 'Where are they taking you?' I moaned loudly. His face fell, then he laughed. 'You must really like this man,' he said rudely. I sighed and rolled my eyes for her benefit.

I heard an engine parked in front of the house. I jumped up and started cleaning my dishes. 'Leave the dishes, I can wash them tonight.' He has robbed me a lot. The doorbell rang and Charlie ran to answer it. I was half the speed behind him. I did not realize how hard it was to lose. Melvin stood in the light of the balcony, looking like a male model in a raincoat commercial. Come in, Melvin. I felt relieved when Charlie got his name right. 'Thank you, King Rabbit,' Melvin said in a respectful tone. Keep calling me Charlie. Here, I will get your jacket.' 'Thank you, sir.' 'Sit there, Melvin. I complained.

Melvin floated to the only chair and forced me to sit next to Chief Black on the sofa. I glared at him quickly. He blinked behind Charlie. So, I heard you are going to let my daughter watch Kickball. It is only in Washington that the fact that it is raining does not matter at all for outdoor sports. 'Yes, sir, that was the plan. He was not surprised that I told

my father the truth. But he might listen. 'Well, I think, give you more power.' Charlie smiled, and Melvin agreed. 'Okay.' I stood up. 'Enough humor at my expense. Now we are going to drive.' I went back down the hall and put on my coat.

They follow. 'It won't be too late, Lill.' 'Don't worry, Charlie, I'll get home early,' Melvin assured me. 'You take care of my girls, okay? I moan, but they ignore me.' She will be safe with me, I promise, sir. Charlie could not doubt Melvin's sincerity, it rang in every word. I strode out. They all laughed, and Melvin followed me. I died on the porch. Behind my car, there is a monster jeep. The tires are taller than my waist. There are metal covers on the headlights and taillights, and four headlights are mounted on the crash bars. The hardtop is shiny red. Charlie let out a low whistle. 'Fasten your seat belt,' he said, choking. Melvin followed me to my side and opened the door. I measured the distance to my seat and was ready to jump on. He sighed, then took me in with one hand, I hope Charlie had not noticed. I tried to fasten my seat belt as he walked over to the driver's side at a normal human pace. But there were too many buttons. 'What is going on?' I opened the door and asked.

This is an off-road seat belt. 'Uh-oh.' I tried to find the right spot to install all the buckles, but it was not fast. He sighed again and

reached out to help me. I am glad the rain was so heavy that I could not see Charlie on the porch. That meant I could not see Melvin's hand on my neck, stroking my collarbone. I gave up helping him and focused on not hyperventilating. Melvin turned the key and the engine roared. We left the house. This is a... Well...you have a big jeep.' 'It is Dejen's. I did not think you would want to run all the way.' 'Where do you keep this thing?' We converted one of the outbuildings into a garage.' 'Aren't you wearing your seat belt?' what is there. 'Run all the way? Like, we still must run part of the way? My voice is a few octaves higher. He gives a wry smile. 'You're not going to run.' 'I am going to be sick. 'Close your eyes and you will be fine. 'I bit my lip, fighting back my panic. He leaned over and kissed my upper body.' He nodded, then moaned. I looked at him puzzled. 'You smell really good in the rain,' he explained. 'Is it good or bad?' I asked cautiously. He sighed. 'Both.' I do not know how he found his way in the darkness and the downpour, but somehow, he found a trail that was not a road, more like a mountain road. Could not talk for a long time as I bounced up and down the seat like a jackhammer.

However, he enjoyed the ride and had a good laugh along the way. Then we came to the end of the road; trees formed green walls on three sides of the jeep. The rain was just a drizzle, getting smaller in a

second, the sky getting brighter through the clouds. 'Sorry, Lily, we have to go from here.' 'You know what? I will be waiting here.' 'What's wrong with your courage?' 'I haven't forgotten last time.' 'Could it be just yesterday? He was vaguely beside me, and he started to unbutton me. I will get them, you go on,' I protested. Um...' He finished quickly. 'Looks like I'm going to have to manipulate your memory.'

Before I could react, he pulled me out of the jeep and put my feet on the ground. There is almost no fog now; Naddalin Natalie would be right. 'Manipulating my memory?' I asked nervously. 'About that. He looked at me intently, carefully, but there was humor deep in his eyes. He put his hands on the jeep on either side of my head and leaned forward, forcing me to push the door back. He got closer.

Now, his face is inches from mine. There is no escape for me.' Now,' he breathed, only his scent disrupted my thought process, 'what are you worried about? 'Well, well, hit a tree-' I swallowed'-and died. Then get sick. 'He smiled back.' Then he lowered his head and moved his cold lips gently to the hollow at the base of my neck. 'Are you still worried now?'

He murmured against my skin. 'Of course. I had a challenging time concentrating.' About hitting trees and getting sick. 'His nose ran along the skin of my neck all the way to my chin. His icy breath made my



skin itch. 'And now?' He whispered his lips against my chin. 'Trees,' I gasped. 'Rat disease.' He raised his face and kissed my eyelids. 'Lily, you don't really think I'm going to hit a tree, do you?' 'No, but I can.' There was no confidence in my voice. He smelled easy victory. He kissed my cheek slowly and stopped at the corner of my mouth. 'Am I going to let a tree hurt you?' His lips barely touched my quivering lower lip. 'No,' I held my breath. I know there is a second part to my great defense, but I cannot quite take it back. Look, he said, his lips moving towards mine. 'There's nothing to be afraid of, is it?' 'No,' I sighed and gave up.

Then he took my face roughly and kissed me earnestly, his firm lips against mine. There really is no excuse for my actions. Obviously, I know better now. However, I cannot stop reacting like the first time. My arm did not stay still, but stretched out and wrapped tightly around his neck, and I was suddenly welded to his statue. I sighed and parted my lips. He staggered back and broke free from my hand effortlessly. 'Damn it, Lily!' he interrupted, gasping for breath.

'You'll be my death; I swear you will.' I leaned forward, placing my hands on my knees for support. 'You're indestructible,' I whispered, trying to catch my breath. 'Maybe I thought that before I met you. Now it is stupid for us to get out of here before I do,' he growled. He

threw me on his back like before and I can see he needs extra Trying to be as gentle as he is. I locked my legs around his waist and pinned my arms around his throat.'

Do not forget to close your eyes. he warned sternly. I quickly buried my face in his shoulder blades, under my own arms, and closed my eyes. I could barely see us moving. I could feel him sliding down below. I, but he can walk on the pavement with a smooth movement. I was tempted to peek just to see if he flew through the woods like before, but I resisted. It was not worth the horrible dizziness. I was content with it Listen to his breathing come and go evenly. It was not until he reached out and stroked my hair that I was sure we had stopped. It is over, Lily.' I dared to open my eyes, and sure enough we were all standing still. I stiffly let go of the blackmail on his body and slid from behind to the ground.

Ouch! I hit the wet ground, panting. He glared at me, obviously unsure if he was still angry, thought I was funny. But my confused look pushed him to the edge, and he laughed aloud. I got up and ignored him, I brushed the dirt off my body and panted off the back of my coat. It only made him laugh harder. Annoyed, I started walking into the woods. I felt his arms around my waist. Lily, you Where are you going?" Watching a Kickball game. You do not seem to be interested in playing,

but I am sure everyone else would have an exciting time without you.'

'You're going in the wrong direction.' I did not look at him, I turned to the opposite go in the direction. He got me again. 'Don't be angry, I cannot help it. You should see your face.' He laughed before he could stop himself. Oh, are you the only one angry? 'I'm not mad at you.' "Lily, you are the cause of my death?" I quoted bitterly. 'It's just a fact.' I tried to turn away from him again, but he caught me. 'You're crazy,' I insisted. Lily? He was suddenly tense, and all traces of teasing disappeared. 'Don't you understand?'

'See what?' I was confused by his sudden mood swing and his words. 'I am never mad at you-how could I? Brave, trusting...warm like you.' 'Then why?' I whispered, thinking of the dark emotions that pulled him away from me, and I have been Interpreting it as a well-founded frustration-frustrated at my weakness, my dullness, my gruff human reaction... He put his hands lightly at the sides of my face. 'I let myself be upset,' he said softly. 'I cannot seem to avoid myself putting you in danger. My presence puts you in danger. Sometimes I really hate myself. I should be stronger; I should be able to-' I put my hand on his mouth. 'Don't.' He took my hand and moved it from his lips but held his face. I love you, he said. 'It's a terrible excuse for what I've made, but it's still true.' It was the

first time he said he loved me - in a lot of words. He did not realize it, but I did. 'Now try to express yourself,' he continued, leaning over, and brushing my lips lightly. I keep incredibly quiet. Then I sighed.

'You promised Chief Black that you would send me home early, remember?' We'd better go.' 'Yes, ma'am.' He smiled slyly, only letting go of one hand. He took me a few yards, through tall, wet ferns and drooping moss, around a giant hemlock tree, and we were on the edge of a huge clearing atop Olympic Peak. It is twice as large as any Kickball field. I could see the others there; Karly, Dejen and Vivian were sitting on the bare slate, the closest to us, about a hundred meters away. Further afield, I could see Jae and Naddalin Natalie, who were at least a quarter of a mile apart, and they were throwing things back and forth, but I never saw the ball. It looks like Melchor is marking the base, but can they really be that far apart? When we saw the three roses on the rock. Karly came up to us. Dejen watched Vivian's back for a long time and followed. Vivian stood up gracefully and strode toward the field without looking in our direction. In response, my stomach quivered anxiously.

'Did we hear Melvin?' Karly asked as she approached. Dejen clarified that it sounded like a bear was choking. I smiled suspiciously at Karly. 'He is.' 'Lily was unintentionally funny,' Melvin explained, quickly

addressing the issue. Naddalin Natalie has left her place and is running or dancing towards us. She rushed to a water stop under our feet. 'It's time,' she announced. 'As soon as she finished speaking, a deep thunder shook the forest behind us, and then smashed west toward town. Now we are driving.' Naddalin Natalie took Dejen's hand, and they rushed towards the oversized field; She runs like a gazelle. He is as graceful and fast as he is - but Dejen will never match the gazelle.

Are you ready to play? Melvin asked, his eyes longing and bright. I try to sound quite enthusiastic. 'Go team up!' He giggled, and after stroking my hair, he jumped behind the other two. His driving was more aggressive, a cheetah rather than a gazelle, and he quickly passed them. The grace and power take my breath away. 'Are we going down?' Karly asked in her soft, melodious voice, and I realized I was staring blankly at him. I quickly put away my expression and nodded. Karly kept a few feet between us. I do not know if she was still careful not to scare me. Her pace matched mine, but the pace did not seem impatient. Do you not play with them? I asked shyly.

'No, I prefer judgments - I like to keep them honest,' she explained. So, do they like to cheat? 'Oh yes - you should listen to their arguments!' I hope you do not, you will think they were raised by a pack

of wolves. 'You sound like my mom,' I laughed in surprise. She laughed too. 'Well, I consider them my children.' in most respects. I can never get over my maternal instincts - did Melvin say I lost a child? No,' I muttered, stunned, trying to make sense of her life as she remembered. 'Yes, my first and only child. He died a few days after he was born, poor little thing,' she sighed, 'it breaks my heart-that's why I jumped off a cliff, you know,' she added matter-of-factly. Melvin just said Damn you,' I stammered. 'Always a gentleman.' She smiled. -Melvin is my first new son. I have always thought of him that way, even though he is older than me, at least in one way. She smiled warmly at me.

'That's why I'm so glad he found you, honey.' 'The joy on her lips sounded natural. - He's been a weird guy for far too long. It hurts me to see him alone.' 'Do you mind then? I asked and hesitated again. -I... Wrong for him?' 'No.' She thought. 'You're what he wanted. Somehow everything will be fine,' she said, though her brows were furrowed in worry. Another thunderstorm started. Karly stopped.

We are at the venue. Edge. Looks like they have joined forces. Melvin in left field, Melchor between first and second base, and Naddalin Natalie holding the ball, on what must be the pitcher's mound. Dejen waving an aluminum ball Great; it whistled almost untraceable in the air. I

waited for him to get close to home plate, but when he got his feet, I realized he was already there - farther from the mound than I thought Jae was standing a few meters behind him, catching the ball for the other team. Neither of them had gloves, of course.

'Okay,' Karly called in a clear voice that I knew Melvin could hear, no matter what. Where is he? 'Smear. 'Naddalin Natalie stood up straight, motionless. Her style was stealth rather than a terrifying knockout. She took the ball at her waist with both hands, and then, like the blow of a cobra, flicked her right hand, The ball fell into Jae's hands. 'Is it a strike? I whispered to Karly. 'If they don't strike, it's a strike,' she said. Jae threw the ball back into Naddalin Natalie's waiting hand. She gave herself a small smile. Then her hand spun out again, this time the bat somehow went around in time on the unseen ball. The rumbling sound was deafening; it echoed from the hills-I knew immediately the need for a thunderstorm. The ball streaked across the field like a shooting star and into the surrounding forest.

'Home run,' I muttered. 'Wait,' Karly warned, listening intently, one hand raised. Dejen was blurred around the base, Melchor following him. I realized Melvin was gone. Karly May shouted in a clear voice. I watched in disbelief as Melvin ran out of the tree with the ball in

his outstretched hand, his smile even I could see. The game continued before my eyes in disbelief. Could not keep up with the speed of the ball, the speed with which their bodies ran across the field. As Jae tried to avoid Melvin's impeccable pitch, I learned another reason for them to wait for a thunderstorm to hit a ground ball to Melchor. Melchor ran into the ball and then let Jae run to first base. When they collided, the sound was like the sound of two huge boulders falling. I jumped in horror, but somehow, they All fine. Of course,' Karly called in a calm voice. Dejen's team was one ahead - Vivian managed to get around the base after tagging one of Dejen's long flies - and Melvin grabbed the third. He rushed over to me, glistening with excitement. 'What do you think?' He asked.

One thing is for sure, I cannot stand the boring old Kickball league anymore. 'It sounds like you've done so much before,' he laughed. 'I'm a little disappointed,' I joked. 'Why?' he asked suspiciously. 'It would be great if I could find one thing you haven't done better than the rest of the planet.' He gave me his peculiarly crooked smile that took my breath away. 'I'm up,' he said, walking to the plate. He played smartly, kept the ball low, away from Vivian's ready hands in the outfield, and struck two bases with lightning before Dejen brought the ball back into play.



Melchor hit an out-of-bounds hit so far - a thud that stings the ear - and he and Melvin went in. Naddalin Natalie gave them a delicious high five. The scores kept changing as the game went on, and they roared at each other like any street player to turn with the leader. Sometimes Karly called them to order. The thunder rumbled, but we stayed dry, as Naddalin Natalie expected. Melchor was holding Melvin in her arms, and Naddalin Natalie suddenly gasped. My eyes were fixed on Melvin as usual, and I saw him look up at her sharply.

Their eyes met, and in an instant, there was a flow between them. Before anyone else could ask what was wrong with Naddalin Natalie, he was by my side. Karly's voice was tense. 'I didn't see it-I can't tell,' she whispered. Everyone else is here.' What is the matter, Naddalin Natalie? asked Melchor in a calm authoritative voice. They were moving much faster than I thought. I know my previous opinion was wrong, she whispered. Jae leaned against her; his posture protective 'What's changed?' He asks.

'They heard us play and it changed their course,' she said regretfully, as if she felt responsible for anything that scared her. Seven pairs of fast eyes flashed across my face and left. 'How fast?' Melchor said, turning to Melvin. A look of concentration crossed his face. 'Less

than five minutes. They run-they want to play,' he growled. Can you handle it? 'Melchor asked him, his eyes flickering at me again. 'No, don't carry-' He stopped. 'Besides, the last thing we need is for them to catch the scent and start hunting.' 'How many?' 'Dejen asked Naddalin Natalie. 'Three,' she answered succinctly. three! He sneered. 'Let them come.'

A steely band of muscle curled along his thick arm. Melchor thought for a moment, and the moment seemed much longer than it really was. Only Dejen seemed unmoved; everyone else stared at Melchor's face band 'Let's get on with the game,' Melchor finally made up his mind. His voice was calm and even.' Naddalin Natalie said they were simply curious. 'You see, Karly,' he said. 'I will call now. 'He was standing in front of me. The others returned to the field, carefully scanning the dark forest with sharp eyes. Naddalin Natalie and Karly were standing around me.

'Put your hair down,' Melvin said in a muffled voice. And the even voice said. I slid the rubber band from my hair obediently and dangled it around me. I said the obvious. 'Everyone else is here now.' 'Yes, keep quiet, keep quiet, do not move from me, please. He hid the pressure in his voice well, but I could hear it. He pulled my long hair forward and wrapped it around my face. Come on.' It did not help,' Naddalin Natalie said softly, 'I could smell her across the field. 'I know. There was a hint

of frustration in his tone. Melchor stood in front of the plate. The others joined the game half-heartedly. What did Karly ask you? I whispered, and he hesitated for a second before answering. 'If they're thirsty.'

'He muttered reluctantly. Minutes passed and the game was now playing in indifference. No one dared to take a heavier shot than a stack, with Dejen, Vivian and Jae lingering in the infield. Every now and then, despite the fear numbing my brain, I realize Vivian's eyes are on me. They are expressionless, but there is something about her covering her mouth that makes me believe she is angry.

Melvin does not mind it at all. A game with eyes and minds stretching in the forest. 'Sorry, Lily,' he muttered viciously. - It is stupid and irresponsible to expose you like this. I am sorry. I heard him hold his breath; His eyes turned to the field to the right. He took a half-step, stroking himself between me and what was about to happen. Melchor, Dejen, and others turned in the same direction, hearing sounds to my ears too weak.

## 19 Blood Sports

They appeared one after another from the edge of the forest, about ten meters apart. The first man to enter the clearing immediately backed away, leaving the other man in front, positioning himself around

the tall dark-haired man in a way that made it clear who was leading the crowd. The third is a woman, all I can see from this distance is that her hair is a dazzling red.

They closed ranks, then cautiously made their way towards Melvin's family, showing the natural respect a pack of predators have when encountering a larger, less familiar group of their own kind. As they got closer, I could see how different they were from the Shezor. They walk like cats, a gait that always seems borderline crouching. They wore the usual backpacker gear: jeans and a casual button-up shirt of heavy, weather-resistant fabric. However, the clothes were frayed and frayed, and they were barefoot.

Both men had short hair, but the woman's bright orange hair was full of leaves and wood debris. Their piercing eyes carefully caught the more graceful and refined gestures of Melchor, who, flanking Dejen and Jae, cautiously stepped forward to meet them. With no apparent communication between them, each of them sat up in a more relaxed and upright posture. The man in front was the handsomest, with olive skin, a typical pale underside, and shiny black hair. He is average height and muscular, sure, but he is nothing short of Dejen's strength. He smiled slightly, revealing a gleam of white teeth. The woman was wilder, her

eyes moving endlessly between the man facing her and the crowd around me, her tangled hair quivering in the breeze. His pose is resolutely feline. A second male hovered discreetly behind them, thinner than the leader, his light brown hair, and regular featureless features.

His eyes, though completely still, somehow seemed the most alert. Their eyes are also different. Not the gold or black I was expecting, but an eerie, sinister deep burgundy. The dark-haired man, still smiling, walked over to Melchor. We thought we heard a match,' he said in a relaxed voice with the slightest French accent. 'My name is Emilyn, and this is Victoria and Pierre. He gestured to the vampire next to him. I am Melchor. These are my family, Dejen and Jae, Vivian, Karly and Naddalin Natalie, Melvin, and Lily.

He designated us in groups, deliberately without attracting personal attention. I was shocked when he said my name. Do you have room for a few more players? Emilyn asked nicely. Melchor matched Emily's friendly tone. ', we have just finished. But we will be interested some other time. Are you going to be in the area too long?' ', we are going north, but we are curious to know who is around. 'I have not seen any company for a long time.

No, the area is empty except for us and occasional visitors like you. The tension slowly subsided and turned into a casual conversation. Jae, I assume, is using his special talents to control the situation. What is your hunting ground? Emily asked casually. Melchor ignored the assumptions behind the investigation. We reserved permanent residence nearby. There is another permanent settlement like ours near Denali. Emily shook his body slightly. permanent? How did you do? There was honest curiosity in his voice. Why don't you come home with us so we can talk comfortably? Melchor invited. 'It is quite a long story. Pierre and Victoria exchange surprises at the mention of the word 'house', but Emily has more control over his expression. It looks remarkably interesting and exceedingly popular. His smile was kind. 'We went hunting from Ontario and have not had a chance to clean up in a while.

His eyes are on Melchor's polished exterior. No offense, but if you are not hunting in that area neighbor, we are appreciating it. We must keep a low profile, you know,' Melchor explained. certainly. John nodded. 'We will not invade your territory. We are just eating out of Altoona anyway,' he said with a laugh. A shiver ran down my back. If you want to race with us, we will show you the way - Dejen and Naddalin Natalie, you can go buy a Jeep with Melvin and Lily,' he added casually. As Melchor

spoke, three things were happening at once. My hair was ruffled in the breeze, Melvin stiffened, and the second man, Pierre, suddenly turned his head and looked intently at me, his nostrils burning. A wave of stiffness descended on each of them, Pierre stepping forward, crouching. Melvin bared his teeth, crouched down to defend himself, and a wild growl escaped his throat. It was nothing like the playful sound I heard from him this morning. From my head to my head. back of my heels. What is it? Emilyn exclaimed, surprised.

Neither Pierre nor Melvin relaxed their aggressive posture. Pierre leaned slightly to the side Suitor; Melvin also changed position. She was with Melchor's firm refusal was directed at Pierre Emilyn n Didn't seem to catch my scent as strongly as Pierre did, but now there is a realization on his face. Melvin growled more fiercely, harshly; his lips raised above his glistening bare teeth. Emilyn took another step back. I said she was with us,' Melchor corrected in a harsh voice. But she is human,' Emilyn protested. The words were not aggressive at all, just stunned. Yes. Dejen is very visible around Melchor, his eyes on Pierre. Pierre slowly straightened from his squat, but his eyes never left mine, and his nostrils remained wide.

Melvin was as nervous as a lion in front of me. When Emily speaks, his tone is soothing - trying to defuse the sudden hostility. 'Looks like we have a lot to learn about each other. It is true. Melchor's voice is always cool. But we want to accept your invitation. He rolled his eyes at me and at Melchor. 'Good sure we will not hurt. human girl. We do not hunt in your area, as I said. Pierre looked up at Emily in disbelief, then exchanged another look with Victoria, whose eyes were still twinkling face to face. Melchor watched Emily's public expression for a moment before speaking. 'We'll show you the way. Jae, Vivian, Karly?' he called. They were clustered together, blocking my view as they converged. Naddalin Natalie was immediately at my side, and Dejen slowly backed away, his eyes fixed on Pierre as he turned his back to us. Let us go, Lily.

Melvin's voice was low and dark. All the while, I was rooted to the spot, fearful that I was still. Melvin had to grab my elbow and pull hard to break my trance. Naddalin Natalie and Emmet followed close behind and hid from me. I stumbled over to Melvin, still terrified. I cannot hear if the main group is gone. Melvin's impatience was almost palpable as we moved at human speed to the edge of the forest. As soon as we got to the tree, Melvin held me on his back and did not trip. When he left, I held on as hard as I could, and the others followed him. I kept my head



down, but my eyes were wide open and scared and would not close. They walked through what is now the Black Forest like ghosts.

The excitement Melvin usually seemed to have as he ran was completely gone, replaced by an anger that washed over him and drove him even faster. Even though I had my back, others followed. We got to the jeep in an incredibly abbreviated time and Melvin barely slowed down as he threw me into the back seat. Tie her up, he ordered Dejen, who slid in beside me. Naddalin Natalie was already in the front seat and Melvin was starting the engine. He groaned and we turned, turning to face the winding road.

Melvin growled something too fast for me. understand, but it sounded a lot like a litany of profanity. The bumpy ride was much worse, and the darkness only made it more terrifying. Dejen and Naddalin Natalie stared out the side windows. We were on the main road, and although our speed increased, I could see where we were going better. We went south, away from McAuley. Where are we going? I asked. No one answered. No one even looked at me. I must get you out of here - away - now. He did not turn around, his eyes fixed on the road. The speedometer reads one hundred and five miles per hour. Revolve around!

You must take me home! I screamed. I struggled with this stupid seat belt, tearing the belt. Dejen,' Melvin said nonchalantly. Dejen stared at my hand in his steely grip. No! Melvin! No, you cannot do this. I must, Lily, please shut up now. I No! Charlie Go called the FBI!

They will be all over your family-Melchor and Karly! They need to go, hide forever!' 'Calm down, Lily. Her voice was cold. Not on me, you do not! You did not ruin everything for me! I struggled hard, to no avail. Naddalin Natalie spoke for the first time. 'Melvin, pull over.' He gave her a hard look, then sped up. Melvin let us talk about it. You do not understand, he growled in frustration. I have never heard it so loud. It was deafening, within reach of a Jeep. The speedometer was approaching one hundred and fifteen. Reached? He is a stalker! I felt Dejen stiff beside me, and I wondered how he would react to the word. That made more sense to the three of them than to me. I want to. know, but I did not get a chance to ask. Stop, Melvin. Naddalin Natalie's tone was reasonable, but there was a circle of authority in him that I had never heard of before.

An inch by inch of the speedometer is more than twenty points. Do it, Melvin. Listen to me, Naddalin Natalie. I saw his spirit. Stalking was his passion, his obsession - he wanted her, Naddalin Natalie - above all her. He started hunting tonight. He does not know where...' he

interrupted. 'How long do you think it will take him to walk around town through his scent? His pl year was already done before Emily could tell. I gasped, knowing where my scent would take me. 'Charlie! You cannot keep him there! You cannot leave him! I slammed the seat belt. She was right,' Naddalin Natalie said. The car slows down slightly. Let us take a minute and consider our options, coordinates Naddalin Natalie.

The car slows down again, more obviously, then we suddenly shout and come to a stop on the shoulder of the freeway. headquarters. No choice,' Melvin hissed. I am not leaving Charlie! I am screaming. He completely ignored me. We must take her back,' Dejen said finally. He would not be able to touch her. He would wait. Dejen smiled. 'You do not see - you do not understand. Once he is committed to hunting, he is unwavering. We must kill him. Dejen does not seem bothered by the idea. 'It is a choice. 'There are also females. She is with him. If it turns into a fight, the leaders will also accompany them. We have had enough. There is another option,' Naddalin Natalie said calmly.

Melvin turned to her angrily, his voice a harsh growl. 'There are - no - other - options!' 'Dejen and I both looked at him in shock, but Naddalin Natalie did not seem surprised. The silence lasted a long minute, Melvin and Naddalin Natalie staring at each other. I broke it. 'Anyone

want to hear my plan? 'No,' Melvin growled. Naddalin Natalie glared at him, exasperated at last. Listen,' I begged. 'You take me back.'

'No,' he stopped. I named him and moved on. 'I will take you back. I told my dad I wanted to go home to Phoenix. I packed my bags. We waited until this tracker was watching, and then we ran. He would follow us and leave Charlie alone. Charlie, the FBI will not call your family. Then you can take me anywhere you want.' They stared at me, surprised.' It is not a bad idea; it really is not a clever idea.' Dejen's surprise was an insult. 'It might work - and we cannot just leave her father naked. You know that said Naddalin Natalie. Everyone looked at Melvin. 'Too dangerous - I don't want him within a hundred miles of her.' Dejen was confident. 'Melvin, he didn't pass us.' Naddalin Natalie thought for a moment. 'I did not see him attack. He was going to try to wait for us to leave him alone.' It did not take long for him to know that was not going to happen.' You asked me to take you home.' I tried to keep my voice steady. Melvin brought his fingers to his temples and squeezed his eyes shut. 'Please,' I said in a small voice. He did not look up. When he spoke, his voice sounded like a voice.' You are leaving tonight tracker visible or not. You tell Charlie you cannot stand another minute in McAuley. Tell him any story. Pack the first things that touch your hands, and then get in your

car. I do not care what he tells you. You have fifteen minutes. Did you hear me? Fifteen minutes from when you walk in the door.' The Jeep came to life, and he worked hard for us, the tires were the same. The speedometer needle began to race across the dial.' Dejen?' I asked, looking at my hands.' Ah, sorry.' He let me go. A few minutes passed in silence, except for the root of the machine. Then Melvin spoke again.' This is what happens. When we get home, without the tracker, I walk him to the door. Then he has fifteen minutes.'

He thanked me in the mirror for relighting. 'Dejen, get out of the house. Naddalin Natalie, get the car. I will live if he is inside. After he is out, you can take the Jews to the house and tell Melchor.' 'No,' Dejen said. 'I am with you. Think, Dejen. I do not know how long I will be gone. Until we know how far, I am with you.' Melvin was silent. 'If the tracker is there,' he continued, 'we'll keep driving.' 'We'll do it right in front of him,' Naddalin Natalie said. Melvin accepted that.

No matter what problem he had with Naddalin Natalie, he did not hesitate now.' What are we going to do with the Jeep?' He asked. His voice was harsh. 'You take it home.' 'No, you're not,' he said calmly. The mindless stream of profanities began again. 'We can't get in my car,' I whispered. Melvin did not seem to hear me.' I think you guys should leave

me alone,' I said more quietly. He heard that.' Lily, just do it, this time,' he said between gritted teeth.

'Listen, Charlie's not an idiot,' I protested. 'If you're not in town tomorrow, he'll be suspicious.' 'It is no use. We will make sure he is safe, and that is all that matters.' 'Then what about this tracker? Think about it He's with you, wherever you are.' Dejen looked at me, surprised again. 'Melvin, listen to him,' he urged. 'I think he's right.' 'Yes, he agreed,' Naddalin Natalie agreed. 'I can't do that.' That is what Melvin sounds like.' Dejen should stay too,' I continued. 'He really caught Dejen. 'What?' Dejen turned to me. 'You'd better crack him if you stay,' Naddalin Natalie agreed. Melvin stared at her wonder. 'Do you think I should let him go?' Of course not,' said Naddalin Natalie. 'Jae will get him.' 'I can't do that,' Melvin repeated, but this time there was a hint of defeat in his voice. Logic worked on him. I tried to persuade. 'Stay here for a week -' I saw his expression in the mirror and changed - a few days. Let Charlie know you did not kidnap me and lead this Santiago on a wild goose chase.

Make sure there is no more he is in my way. Then come and meet me. Of course, go round and round, and then Jae and Naddalin Natalie can go home.' I could see he was starting to think about it.' Where will we meet?' Phoenix.' Of course.' No. He will hear that where you are

going,' he said nonchalantly. 'And you are going to make it sound like a trick, obviously. He will know that we will know that he is listening. I do not think I will ever say, 'He's the devil,' Dejen closed.

'And if that doesn't work?' There are several million people in Phoenix, I informed him.' It is not hard to find a phone book.' 'I'm not going home.' 'Ah?' he asked, a delicate ring in his voice.' I am old enough to get my own place.' 'Melvin, let's go with him,' Naddalin Natalie reminded him.' What are you going to do in Phoenix?' he asked in his weirdness.' Stay inside.' 'I'd love to.' Dejen thought about the corner Santiago, no doubt.' Shut up, Dejen. Now, if only he could take her alone...' He traveled with a faint smile. I was right.

The Jews now crept slowly as we made our way into town. Despite my bold message, I felt the hair on my arms standing up. I thought of Charlie, alone at home, and I tried to be brave.' Lily.' Melvin's voice was incredibly soft. Naddalin Natalie and Dejen looked out their windows. 'If you let anything happen to yourself - I will hold you accountable. Do you understand that? 'Yes,' I shuddered. He turned to Naddalin Natalie.' Can Jae make it?' Give him some credit, Melvin. She is doing well, given the circumstances.' 'Can you handle it?' she asked. And little Naddalin Natalie pursed her lips in a terrible snarl and let the loose snarled I sat in

the chair startled. Melvin smiled at him. 'But keep your opinions straight,' he stopped abruptly.

## 20 GOODBYES

Charlie is waiting for me. All the lights in the house are on. My mind wandered as I thought of a way to make it go away. It will not be fun. Melvin slows down and stays away from my car. They were all very alert, Ramrod sitting upright, listening to every sound of the wood, looking for every shadow, catching every shadow, catching every shadow, searching for something out of place. The machine cut off, and I sat down, indifferently, as they continued to listen, 'He's not here,' said Melvin. 'Let go.' Dejen came over to help me from his stronghold. 'Don't worry Lily' in a low but cheerful voice, 'we'll get things sorted here in no time.' Moisture eyes as I looked at Dejen. I did not know much about him, but somehow, I never knew when I would see him after dark. I knew this was a faint taste of what I had to live with for the next hour, and the imagined tears began to flow.'

Naddalin Natalie, Dejen. Melvin's voice was a command. They continued into the darkness, which disappeared immediately. Melvin opened the door and took my hand, then into the protection of his arm. He took me. He hurried me home, always clinging to the night.' Fifteen



minutes, he warned his breath. 'I can do it.' I was concerned. I cried. I stood on the porch and held her face in my hand. I looked deeply into his eyes. 'I love you' I said in a low and strong voice.

'I will always love you, no matter what happens now.' 'You'll be fine, Lily,' he said firmly. Just follow the plan, okay? Charlie keeps me safe. He does not love me. Like this, and I want to have a chance to apologize later.' 'Cheer up, Lily. We must hurry.' Immediately the voice. 'One more thing,' I whispered to the audience. 'Don't listen to another word I say tonight!' He backed up, so all I had to do was reach out and kiss his lips with as much force as I could. Then I turned and kicked the door. Get out, Melvin!

I ran inside and shut the door in her face. 'Lily?' Charlie hesitated in the living room and was on his feet. 'Leave me alone!' I yelled at him through my now streaming tears. I ran up the stairs to my room, opened the door, and closed it. I ran to my bed and grabbed my bag. I threw myself on the floor to grab it. I quickly reached between the mattresses and box springs to grab the old sock that contained my secret stash of money. Charlie was hanging on my door. 'Lily, are you okay?' 'What's going on?' Her voice was scared. 'I'm about to give birth,' I yelled, my voice breaking to a perfect pitch. 'Is she hurt?' His tone edged closer to

anger. No!' I am a little shy. I turn to my clothes, and Melvin quietly slips them out of his hands and throws them at me.' Did he screw you up?'

Charlie was confused.' No!' I gasped slightly as I shoved everything into the bag. Melvin tossed the contents of another drawer at me. The bag was full now.' Lily, what is wrong with you?' Charlie yelled at the door and yelled again. 'I'm out with him!' I yelled going to the zipper of my bag. Melvin's hands pushed me, and he calmly added the zipper. He held my hand tightly. 'I'm in the car - go!' he whispered and went to the door pushed me open. He cleared the window. I opened the door and passed Charlie, running up the stairs struggling with my heavy bag. 'What happened?' he shouted. He was behind me. 'I thought you liked it.' He grabbed my elbow in the kitchen. Still surprised, his grip was still firm. He embraced me to see him, and I saw in his face that he had no intention of leaving. I could think of only one way of escape, and I hated myself thinking of it, as it would involve hurting him. But I had no time, and I had to wait for him. I cried to my father, fresh tears in my eyes for what I was about to do.' I want it -that ISIS the problem. I cannot take it anymore! I cannot download it here! I do not want. To wrap up those trapped in this tube-like Mother City!

~\*~

I never made the same mistake she did. I hate him-I cannot stay here another minute!' His hand fell on mine as I chose. I turned away from his shocked face and went to the door. 'Bells, you can't go out now, it's late,' he whispered behind me. I turned away. 'If I'm tired, I'll sleep in the car.' Then he will come back.' I was completely terrified. 'What?' Charlie was so excited; I was so sad when he hesitated. 'He called him while you were out. Things were not going well in California , and if Deann could not sign at the end of that week, they would return to Arizona. The Sidewinders assistant coach said they may have another position. A moment.' I shook my head trying to remember my confused thoughts. Every second that passed put Charlie in more danger.' I have a key.'

I hesitantly turned to read. He was close, one hand outstretched to me, his face surprised. I will not waste any more time arguing with him. I must hurt him more.' Let me go, Charlie.' I echoed my mother's last words when she walked through this door so many years ago. I told them as angrily as I could and closed the door. 'It is not going to work, okay?

'I hate McAuley so much!'

My harsh words had done their job- Charlie was smiling at the door, surprised, and I ran into the night. I was

really scared of the empty yard. I saw the dark shadow behind me and ran weakly to the car. I threw my bag on the bed and opened the door. The key was waiting numbly. 'I will call you tomorrow!' I yelled, wanting more than anything I Hadad ever expressed before, knowing I could not. I started the engine and turned it off the engine. Melvin held out his hand. 'Pull over,' said the house, and Charlie disappeared behind us. 'I can drive,' I said, tears running down my cheeks. His long arms unexpectedly grabbed my waist, and his foot pushed my foot off the gas pedal. He pulled me onto his lap, put my free hands on the wheel, and suddenly sat in the driver's seat. The car did not move. 'You can't see the house,' he explained.

Suddenly the lights behind us turn on. I looked out the back window in wide terror. 'Naddalin Natalie is done now,' she said. He held my hand again. A picture of Charlie filled the picture of Charlie on the door. 'Follow up?' He heard the end of your presentation,' Melvin said. Charlie?'

I asked him what I knew.' The tracker followed. He is running behind us now.' My body froze. Can we let him out?' No. But he got up as he spoke. The car's engine screeched in protest. Suddenly, my plan did not feel so bright. I was watching Naddalin Natalie's headlights as the car

pulled up and a black shadow appeared outside the window. Before Melvin's hand fell to my mouth, I was bleeding. He took two seconds. 'It's Dejen!' He released my mouth and wrapped an arm around my waist. 'It's okay, Lily,' he promised. 'You'll be fine.'

We ran through the quiet town to the northern streets. 'I don't understand how you're still bored in the small town,' he said, and I knew he was trying to distract me. Time. I am telling myself that my life is more interesting for you.' 'I'm not good,' I said, ignoring his efforts to distinguish. - Another, on my knees, watching. 'That's what Mother said when she left him. You can say I hit a belt.' 'Don't worry, he'll forgive you.' He smiled a little, though he did not meet her eyes. I looked at her worriedly, and she saw the empty fear in my eyes. 'Lily, everything is going to be okay. For a few days,' he said and hugged me tightly.

'Don't forget it's your idea' is a great idea - mine of course. His answer was rubbish and he immediately disappeared.' Why is this happening?' I asked, my voice cracking. 'Why me?' He looked down at the road. 'It was my fault-I was a fool to expose you like that.' The excitement in his voice was managed from within. 'That's not what I meant,' I choked. 'I was there, it was important. It did not bother the other two. Why did Santiago decide to kill people everywhere, why me?' He hesitated

thoughtfully before answering, 'I have a good idea in his mind tonight,' he began in a deep voice.

'I'm not sure if there's anything I can do to prevent it,' he saw you once. It was partly your fault.' His voice was worried. 'If you did not smell so luxurious, he would not mind. But when I defended you...well, that made it worse. He is not used to being denied, no matter how important the matter. He thinks of himself as a hunter and nothing else. His life is consumed by the pursuit, and he is a challenger in his life. He asks for a situation.

Suddenly we offer a good test - a big shot of strong warriors to protect every vulnerable body. Now you will not believe how great it is. This is his favorite game, and now we have made it his most enjoyable game. His voice was full of joy. 'He remembered for a moment.' 'But if I had gotten up, he would have killed you then,' he said hopefully. I thought ... I do not have the same smell on others ... as I do on you,' he said. But this does not mean that they are not tested by each. If they agree with the tractor - or any of them - if they agree with me in the same way, then it means war there.' 'I have no choice but to kill him now,' he thought. 'Melchor doesn't want this.'

I could not see the river in the dark, but I could hear the wheels crossing the bridge. I know we are close. I had to ask him now.' 'How do you kill a vampire?' He looked at me with unreadable eyes and suddenly his voice was sad. The only way to be sure is to destroy it and burn the pieces. 'And the two of them fight?' The woman. Not sure about Emilyn.

They do not have a strong bond - it is just there for convenience. Santiago shames him in the field... 'But Santiago and Seth - will they try to kill you?' I asked what my voice was. 'Lily, do not worry when you are worried about me. All you are worried about is protecting yourself and please, please - you are trying not to be rude.' 'Still? Follow?' Yes. But he does not attack the house. Not tonight.' He turned off the invisible drive, Naddalin Natalie following behind him. We closed in on the house. The lights inside were bright, but they did not do much to dispel the darkness of the forest.

Dejen opened my door. Before the car stopped. He pulled me out of the seat and placed me on his chest, as wide as a football. The door swung open, and we entered the great white room, Melvin and Naddalin Natalie beside us. They were all there with the sound of footsteps as we approached. Emilyn stood between them. I could hear the faint sound of a

pipe in Dejen's throat as he dropped me next to Melvin. They were following us,' Melvin said, in Emily's face. He was sad. 'I was afraid of that.' Naddalin Natalie danced beside Jae and whispered in his ear; Her lips were told by the speed of her silent speech. And they went. Vivian looked at them and immediately went to Dejen's side. Her beautiful eyes were intense and-as they flashed unbelievably into my face--he was angry. 'What is he going to do?' Melchor asked, filling Emilyn in. 'I'm sorry,' he replied. 'I was afraid he'd put him there when your son was defending him.' 'Can you stop him?'

Emily shook his head. 'There's no stopping Santiago when he starts.' For him,' Dejen promised. No doubt he meant it.' You cannot take it. I have never seen anything like it in three hundred years. He let it go. And I joined his promise.' His promise, I thought, of course. It was only to show leadership in purification, a show. Emilyn shook his head. He looked at me, pleaded, and returned to Carlyle. 'Of course. they are. Do you understand?'

Melvin filled the room. Emilyn was crying. Melchor looked at Emily intently. 'I am afraid you must choose. Bright room.' I am amazed at the life you have created here. But I cannot log in here. I have no hate, but I am not going to go against Santiago. I am the head of the North - that



tribe in Denali. His mind is amazing, and his passion is unmatched. He is as comfortable in the world as you seem, and he will not come to you...

I am sorry I neglected you here. He was incredibly sad.' But as he bent down, I saw him driving another riddle.' Calm down,' Melchor replied casually. Emilyn checked himself and hurried out the door. The silence lasted less than a second.' How close?' Melchor looked at Melvin. Karly; his hand went to the wall and a large key on the wall, and with a sigh, began to seal the large metal shutters to the mirror on the wall. I was incredibly surprised.' About three miles across the river; He turned around to find the girl.'

-And-

'What's the plan?' We led her, then Jae and Naddalin Natalie ran south.' 'And then?' Melvin's tone was deadly. 'Once it's clear Lily, we'll teach.'

'I guess there's no other choice,' Melchor agreed, frowning. Melvin turned to Vivian. 'Get her ladder and business clothes,' Melvin ordered. He stared at her in disbelief.' Why?' he doubted. 'What is he to me? Other than a danger-a danger you choose to ignore for all of us. I recoiled from the venom in her voice.' Rose...' Dejen murmured and put a

hand on her shoulder. He shook his head. But knowing Melvin's anger, I looked at him carefully, worried about his reaction.

I was surprised. He saw that Vivian was lifeless, unable to speak.' Karly?' he asked softly.' Of course, Karly complained. Karly was at my side in half a heartbeat, easily swinging me in her arms and washing up the stairs before I could gasp in shock. 'What are we doing?' I gasped as he led me down the second hallway into a dark room. 'Trying to block the smell won't work for long, but it will help you out.' I could hear his clothes falling to the floor. 'I don't think I agree...' I was hesitating, but suddenly his hands pulled my shirt over my head. I immediately took off my jeans. He gave me something like a shirt. I had a tough time getting my hands into the right hole. As I did so, he handed me his pants. I took care of them, but I could not find my feet; They are exceptionally long. He threw up the heat several times to get me up.

At least he was in my clothes. On the steps where Naddalin Natalie stood, he handed me a small bag in one hand. As they approached the stairs, they grabbed one of my elbows and half-carried me. Everything seems fine without us. Melvin and Dejen were ready to leave, Dejen carrying his heavy backpack over his shoulder. Melchor had a small hands-on Karly. 'Karly and Vivian will take your car, Lily,' he said as he

passed. I tried, looking intently at Vivian. He beamed at Melchor with a sad expression, 'Naddalin Natalie, Jae - find Mercedes. You will need the dark mines to the south.' And they ran.' We are taking a jeep. I was surprised to see that Melchor was planning to go with Melvin. I was shocked to learn that they were suddenly forming a hunting party.'

Naddalin Natalie Carlyle, 'Will They Take Common Sense? Everyone looked at Naddalin Natalie as she closed her eyes and was still stunned. His eyes finally opened. 'He'll follow you. The woman will follow her car. Then we will have to go.' His voice was confident.' Let us go.'

Melchor started walking towards the kitchen. But sometimes Melvin was by my side. He grabbed me in his iron grip, crushing me into him.

He did not seem to know that he was looking at his family as he pulled my face to his and lifted my feet off the floor. For a moment, his lips were shy and heavy on mine. Then it is over. He sat me down, still holding my face, his precious eyes burning into me. she cried, dying of excitement, as she turned. And they are gone. We stood there, the others watching me with tears streaming down my face. A moment of silence continued, and Karly's phone slipped out of her hand. 'Now,' he said,

cupping his ear. Vivian opened the front door without another glance in my direction, but Karly kissed me on the cheek as she left.

'See you soon.' His whisper stopped them as they made their way to the door. I heard my car very loudly, and then I was gone. Jae and Naddalin Natalie waited. Naddalin Natalie's phone was in her ear before it rang.' Melvin said the girl was on Esmee's Road. I will get the car.' Melvin walks away and fades into the shadows of the street. Jae and I looked at each other. He stopped an entrance length from me... careful.' You are wrong, you know,' he said softly. 'What?' I stopped. 'How you feel right now-and you deserve it.' 'No,' I snapped. 'If something happens to them, it won't happen again.' 'You're wrong,' he repeated, smiling. I did not hear anything, but Naddalin Natalie came to the door and came to me with her arms outstretched. I agree. he asked. You are the first to ask for permission. I smiled. He pulled me up to his boyfriend who hugged me as easily as Dejen, then we flew out the door, then we flew out the door and the lights came on behind us.

## 21 Meanings

When I woke up, I was confused. My thoughts were confused, still twisted in dreams and nightmares; It took me longer than I should realize where I was. This room was too boring to belong anywhere

other than a hotel. The bedside lamps attached to the tables were a real treat, as were the long curtains of the same fabric as the bedspread and the generic watercolor prints on the walls. I tried to remember how I got here, but nothing came at first. I remembered the shiny black car, the windows darker than those of a sedan. The engine was silent despite driving on black highways at more than twice the legal speed. And I remembered Naddalin Natalie sitting with me in the dark leather back seat. Somehow my head had fallen against his granite neck during the long night.

She did not seem bothered at all by my proximity and her cold, hard skin comforted me strangely. The front of his thin cotton shirt was cold, wet from the tears that flowed from my eyes until they were dry, red, and sore. Sleep had escaped me; My sore eyes widened even as the night was finally ending, and dawn was breaking over a low peak somewhere in California. The gray light that crossed the cloudless sky caught my attention. But I could not close them; As I did this, the images that flashed all too vividly, like still images behind my covers, were unbearable. Charlie's broken expression - Melvin's brutal growl, bared teeth - Vivian's vengeful gaze - the tracker's watchful gaze - the dead look in Melvin's eyes after he kissed me last time...

I could not bear to see her. So, I fought my fatigue and the sun rose higher. I was still awake when we crossed a flat mountain pass and, now behind us, the sun was reflecting off the tiled roofs of the Valle del Sol. I did not have enough emotion to be surprised that I had taken a three-day trip in one. I stared blankly at the wide, flat expanse that stretched before me. Phoenix - palm trees, shrub creosote, random lines of intersecting highways, verdant expanses of golf courses, and turquoise patches of swimming pools, all bathed in thin smog and embraced by short rocky ridges that are not big enough they had to be called mountains.

The shadows of the palm trees slanted across the highway: defined, sharper than I remembered, fainter than they should have been. Nothing could hide in those shadows. The bright, open highway looked benign enough. But I felt no relief, no sense of homecoming. 'Which way for the trains station, Lily?' Jae had asked, and I flinched, even though his voice was quite sweet and disturbing. It was the first sound, other than the hum of the car, that broke the silence of the long night: 'Keep on I-Ten,' I answered automatically.

'We will pass by.' My brain had been working slowly through the haze of sleep deprivation. 'Let's go somewhere?' I had asked Naddalin Natalie: 'No, but it's better to be around, just in case.' I remembered

starting the tour around Sky Harbor International ... but not finishing it. It was when I fell asleep. Although now that I was chasing the memories, I had a vague idea of getting out of the car - the sun was just dipping below the horizon - my arm was draped over Naddalin Natalie's shoulder and her arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me forward as he stumbled through the warm, dry shadows. I had no memory of this room. I looked at the digital clock on the bedside table. The red numbers said it was three o'clock but did not indicate whether it was day or night. No streak of light escaped the thick curtains, but the room was illuminated by the light of the lamps.

I stood up stiffly and staggered to the window, pulling back the curtains. It was dark outside. So, three in the morning. My room overlooked a deserted stretch of the highway and the new long-stay trains station parking lot. It was reassuring to be able to pinpoint the exact time and place. I looked at myself. I was still wearing Karly's clothes and they did not fit me at all. I looked around the room and was happy to spot my duffel bag on top of the low dresser. I was on my way to find some new clothes when a light knock on the door made me jump: 'May I come in?'

Naddalin Natalie asked. I took a deep breath. 'Clear.' He entered and looked at me cautiously. 'Looks like you might be sleeping

late,' he said. I just shook my head. He silently walked over to the curtains and closed them tightly before turning back to me. 'We have to stay inside,' he told me. 'All right'. My voice was hoarse; cracked 'Thirsty?' churches. I shrugged. 'I'm fine and you?' 'Nothing overwhelming.' She smiled. 'I ordered some food for you; he is in the first room. Melvin reminded me that you must eat a lot more often than we do.' I was immediately more alert. 'Called?' 'No,' he said, watching my face drop. 'That was before we left.' He carefully took my hand and led me through the door into the living room of the hotel suite. I could hear a low hum of voices coming from the TV. Jae sat motionless at the desk in the corner, his eyes watching the news without a glimmer of interest. I sat on the floor next to the coffee table where he was waiting for a tray of food and started pecking at him, not realizing what I was eating.

Naddalin Natalie sat on the arm of the sofa and stared blankly at the TV like Jae. I ate slowly, watching her, turning from time to time to take a quick look at Jae. He was beginning to realize they were too quiet. They never took their eyes off the screen, even though the commercials were airing now. I pushed the tray away, my stomach suddenly nauseous. Naddalin Natalie was looking at me: 'What's going on Naddalin Natalie?' I



asked, 'There is nothing wrong'. His eyes were big, honestly ... and I did not trust them. 'What do we do now?' 'We're waiting for Melchor to call.'

'And should he have called now?' I could see that I was near the door. Naddalin Natalie's eyes darted from mine on the phone to her leather bag and back. 'What does it mean?' My voice was shaking, and I was struggling to control it. 'Who hasn't called yet?' 'It just means they have nothing to tell us.' But his voice was too even, and the air was harder to breathe. Jae was suddenly next to Naddalin Natalie, closer to me than usual. 'Lily,' he said in a suspiciously reassuring voice. 'You have nothing to fear. You are perfectly safe here.' 'I know.' 'Then why are you afraid?' he asked confused. He could feel the tenor of my emotions, but he could not read the reasons why 'You heard what Emilyn said.' My voice was just a whisper, but I was sure they could hear me. 'he said Pierre was mortal. What if something goes wrong and they separate? If something happens to either of them, Melchor, Dejen ... Eduard ...' I swallowed. 'If that wild whore hurts Karly...' My voice had risen, a hint of hysteria starting to rise in her.

'How could I live with myself when it is my fault? Neither of you should risk it for me -' Lily, Lily, stop it, 'she interrupted, her words pouring out so fast it was hard to swallow to understand. Wrong things,

Lily. Believe me, none of us is in danger. They are too stressed out the way they are; Don't add that to completely unnecessary worries. Listen to me!' He ordered because I had looked away. 'Our family is strong. Our only fear is losing you.' 'But why would you-' Naddalin Natalie cut him off this time, touching my cheek with her cold fingers. 'It has been a century since Melvin was left alone. Now he has found you. You cannot see the changes we are seeing, we who have been with him for so long. Do you think some of us would like to look him in the eye for the next few? a hundred years, when will he lose you?' My guilt slowly subsided as I looked into his dark eyes. But even though the calm had settled over me, I knew 'that I could not trust my feelings with Jae there. It has been an exceptionally long day. We were in the room.

Naddalin Natalie called the front desk and asked them to ignore our housekeeping. for the moment. The windows remained closed, the TV on, even though no one saw it. Food was delivered to me at regular intervals. The silver phone resting on Naddalin Natalie's bag seemed to get bigger as the hours went by. My babysitters handled the tension better than I.

As I fidgeted and walked, they grew more, two statues whose eyes followed me imperceptibly as I moved. I took care of memorizing the

room; the striped pattern of the sofas, light brown, peach h, cream, dull gold, and tan again. Sometimes I would stare at abstract prints and randomly find images in shapes as I found images in the clouds as a child. I traced a blue hand, a woman combing her hair, a cat that stretches. But when the pale red circle became a steady eye, I looked away. As the afternoon passed, I went back to bed just to do something. I hoped that alone in the dark I could give in to the terrible fears that hovered on the edge of my consciousness and could not break through under Jae's careful supervision.

Nevertheless, Naddalin Natalie followed me casually as if by chance she was getting tired of the entrance room at the same time. I was beginning to wonder what kind of instructions Melvin had given her exactly. I lay down on the bed and she sat down next to me, cross-legged. At first, I ignored her, suddenly tired enough to sleep. But after a few minutes, the panic that had remained in Jae's presence made itself felt. Then I gave up on the idea of going to sleep quickly, curled up in a ball, and wrapped my arms around my legs 'Naddalin Natalie?' I asked 'Yes?'

I kept my voice very calm. 'What do you think they are doing?' 'Melchor wanted to take the pursuer as far north as possible, wait for him to approach, then turn and ambush him. Karly and Vivian should

go west while they take the female behind them. She turned around, they should come back from McAuley and keep an eye on your dad. So, I guess things will be fine if they cannot call. It means the locator is close enough that you do not want it. 'I overheard. ' 'What about Karly?' 'I think she must be back in McAuley. She will not call if the female is likely to hear. I expect everyone to be incredibly careful.' Do you think they are safe? 'Lily, how many times do we have to tell you that there is no danger for us?' 'But would you tell me the truth?'

'Yes. I will always tell you the truth.' His voice was serious. I thought about it for a moment and decided he meant it, 'So tell me ... How did you become a vampire?' My question surprised her. She was calm. I turned to face her, and her expression seemed ambivalent. 'Melvin does not want me to tell you, 'She said firmly, but I heard she disagreed. 'It is not fair. Me.' a right to know. 'I know. 'I looked at her and waited. She sighed.' He will be extremely angry. 'None of his business. This is between you and me, Naddalin Natalie, as a friend, please.' And now we were friends, a little bit - as he must have always known we had always been. She looked at me with those glorious, wise eyes... choose.

'I'll explain the mechanics,' she finally said, 'but I do not remember it by myself, and I have never done or seen it, so remember I

can only tell you the theory. I waited. ' As predators, we have an excess of weapons in our physical arsenal, much, much more than is needed. Power, speed, acute senses, not to mention those like Melvin, Jae, and me who also have additional senses. And then, like a carnivorous flower, we are physically attractive to our prey. 'I was very still, remembering how clearly Melvin had demonstrated the same concept to me in the meadow.

She smiled with a wide, sinister smile.' We have another quiet one. redundant weapon. We are poisonous too, 'he said, his teeth glistening.' Poison does not kill; it just renders us incapable. It works slowly and spreads through the bloodstream so that once we bite our prey it has too much physical pain to escape from us. Mostly superfluous, as I said. When we are this close, the prey will not escape. Of course, there are always exceptions. Melchor, for example.

'Well ... if you let the poison spread ... 'I mumbled.' It takes a few days to complete the transformation depending on how much poison is in the bloodstream, and how close the poison gets to the heart. If the heart continues to beat, the poison spreads, healing and altering the body as it moves through it. Eventually, the heart stops and the conversion are complete. But all the time, every minute, a victim would want death. It is not pleasant, you know? 'Melvin said it was exceedingly difficult to do ... I

do not understand,' I said. We too are like sharks in a way. Once we taste or even smell the blood, it becomes exceedingly difficult to stop it from feeding. Sometimes impossible. So, you see, biting someone, tasting the blood, would start the frenzy. It is hard on both sides: the bloodlust on one side, the terrible pain on the other. 'Why do you think you don't remember?'

I do not know. For everyone else, the pain of transformation is the sharpest memory they have of their human lives. I remember nothing of human beings. 'Her voice was melancholy. We gig in silence, wrapped in our meditations. Seconds passed and I had almost forgotten her presence, I was so caught up in my thoughts. Then Naddalin Natalie jumped out of bed without notice and she landed lightly on her feet. My head jumped as I stared at her in horror. 'Something has changed.' Her voice was urgent, and she no longer spoke to me. She reached the door at the same time as Jae. It was evident that she had overheard our conversation and his sudden exclamation. He put his hands on her shoulders and led her back to the bed, putting her on the edge.' he asked intently, staring into her eyes. His eyes were fixed on something far away. I sat next to her and leaned over to hear her deep, fast voice. I see a room. It is long and there are mirrors everywhere.

The floor is made of wood. He is in the room waiting. There's gold ... a strip of gold on the mirrors. 'Where's the room?' 'I do not know. Something is missing, another decision has not yet been made.' 'How much time?' be in the mirror room today or maybe tomorrow. It depends. He is waiting for something. And now he is groping in the dark. 'Jae's voice was calm, methodical as he virtually questioned her.' 'What is he doing?' 'He's watching TV ... No, he is running a VCR, in the dark, in a different place. 'Can you see where it is?' 'No, it's too dark.' 'And the mirror room, what else is there?' 'Just the mirrors and the gold. It is a band running around the room. And there is a black table with a big stereo and a TV. You touch the VCR there, but it does not look like it does in the darkroom. That is, it. room he is waiting in.' Her eyes wandered, then focused on Jae's face. 'Isn't there anything else?' She shook her head. They stared at each other without moving. 'What does that mean?' I asked. Neither answered for a moment, then Jae looked at me. 'It means the tracker's plans have changed. He has made a decision that will lead him to the mirror room and the dark room.' But we do not know where those rooms are.

'No. 'But we know he will not be in the mountains north of Washington, to be kicked out. He will evade them.' Naddalin Natalie's

voice was dark: 'Shall we call?' I asked. They exchanged serious, undecided glances. And the phone rang. Naddalin Natalie was across the room before I could raise my head to look at her. He pushed a button and put the phone to his ear, but he did not speak first. 'Melchor' he whispered. She did not seem surprised or relieved the way I felt. 'Yes,' she said, looking at me. He listened for a long time: 'I just saw it.' He again described the vision he had seen. 'Whatever got him on that plane ... brought him into these rooms.' It stopped.

'Yes,' Naddalin Natalie said on the phone, and then spoke to me. 'Pretty?' He handed me the phone. I ran upstairs. 'Hello?' 'Lily,' he sighed in frustration, 'I told you not to worry about anything but yourself.' It was so incredibly beautiful to hear his voice. The floating cloud of despair lightened and rolled back as he spoke. 'Where are you?' 'We're out of Vancouver. Lily, I am sorry - we lost him. He seems suspicious of us - he makes sure he stays far enough away that he cannot hear what he is thinking. But now he is gone - he looks like he has boarded a plane. We think he is back in McAuley to start over.' I could hear Naddalin Natalie fill Jae behind me, her quick words mingling into a hum. 'I know. Naddalin Natalie saw him escape.' 'You do not have to worry though.



He will not find anything that brings him to you.' You just must stay there and wait for us to find him. I will be fine. Is Karly with Charlie? 'Yes, the female was in town. She went home, but while Charlie was at work. She did not come close to him, so do not worry. He will be safe with Karly and Vivian watching him. 'What are you doing?' 'Probably trying to track down. That night she was walking around town. Vivian followed her through the trains station, all the streets in town, the school ... She is digging, Lily, but there is nothing to do with it. to find.'

'And are you sure Charlie is safe?' Yes, Karly does not let his eyes pop out. And we will be there soon. If the locator gets anywhere near McAuley, we will have it. 'I miss you,' I whispered. I know Believe me I know. It is as if you yourself took half of me.' 'Get it,' I challenged. Quick, as fast as possible. I will get you safe first. 'His voice was hard.' I love you, 'I reminded him. Could you believe that despite everything I have done to you, I still love you?' Yes, I really can. " I will be there for you. 'I will wait for you. 'As soon as the phone went out, the cloud of depression began to creep over me again. I turned to hand the phone back to Naddalin Natalie and found her and Jae hunched over the table where Naddalin Natalie was drawing on a piece of hotel paper. I leaned back on the sofa and looked over her shoulder. She drew a room: long, rectangular, with a

thinner square section at the back. The planks. of the wooden floor that made up the floor stretched lengthwise across the room.

There were lines on the walls indicating the breaks in the mirrors.

-And-

Then, wrapping the walls at waist height, a long ribbon. The band that Naddalin Natalie said was gold. 'It's a dance studio,' I said, suddenly recognizing the familiar shapes. They looked at me in surprise, 'Do you know this room?' Jae's voice was calm, but there was an undertone of something I could not identify.' Naddalin Natalie lowered her tea stands in front of his work, his hand now flying over the page, the shape of an emergency exit taking shape on the back wall, the stereo and TV on a low table in the front right corner. 'Looks like a place I have been taking dance lessons since - when I was eight or nine. It was the same shape. 'I touched the side where the square section protruded, limiting the back of the room.'

There were the bathrooms - the doors were across the other dance floor. But the stereo was there ' - I pointed to the left corner - ' it was older and there was no TV. There was a window in the waiting room - you

would see the room. 'See it from this perspective when you look through it.' Naddalin Natalie and Jae stared at me 'Are you sure it's the same room?' Jae asked, still calm. 'No, not at all - I suppose most dance studios would look the same - the mirrors, the bar.' I ran my finger along the dance bar pointing towards the mirrors. 'It's just the shape that looked familiar.'

I touched the door, in the same place as the one I remembered. 'Do you have any reason to go there now?' Naddalin Natalie asked, breaking my reverie. 'No, I have not been there for ten years. I was a terrible dancer - they always put me on the back burner for recitals,' I admitted. So, there is no way it could be related to you? 'Naddalin Natalie asked carefully.' No, I do not even think the same person owns it. I am sure it is just another dance studio somewhere.

'Where was the studio you went to?' Jae asked casually.' It was just around the corner from my mother's house. I walked there after school ... 'I said, my voice going out. I did not miss the look they exchanged.' So here in Phoenix? 'His voice was still nonchalant.' Yes, 'I whispered.' Fifty-eighth Street and cactus. 'We all sat in silence, staring at the drawing.' Naddalin Natalie, is the phone safe? 'Yes, 'he reassured me.'

The number would just go back to Washington. Then I can use him to call my mom. 'I thought he was in California.

'He is ... but he'll be home soon, and he can't go back to this house until...' My voice was shaking. I thought of something Melvin had said about the red-haired woman at Charlie's house at school, where my records would be. 'How are you going to achieve her?' 'They don't have a landline, except at home - you should check your messages regularly.' Jae? 'Naddalin Natalie asked. She thought about it.' I do not think it will hurt in any way, make sure you do not say where you are, of course. 'I grabbed the phone eagerly and dialed the familiar number. It rang four times, and then I heard my mother's ethereal voice telling me to leave a message. 'Mom,' I said after the beep, 'it is me. Look, I need you to do something. This is important. As soon as you get this message, call me on this number. 'Naddalin Natalie was already by my side, writing the number at the bottom of her picture. I read it carefully, twice.' Please do not go anywhere until you talk to me.

Do not worry, I am fine, but I need to talk to you right away, no matter how late you get this call, okay? I love you, mom. Hi. 'I closed my eyes and prayed with all my might that no unexpected changes in plans would bring her home before she got my message. I settled on the

sofa and munched on a plate of leftover fruit, anticipating a long evening. thought about calling Charlie but did not know if I had to be home now or not. I focused on the news, listening to stories about California or spring training - strikes or hurricanes or terrorist attacks - whatever could send her home soon. immortality must grant infinite patience. Neither Jae nor Naddalin Natalie felt the need to do anything. For a while, Naddalin Natalie sketched the vague outlines of the darkroom from her sight as far as she could see in the TV light.

Likewise, when she finished, she just sat and looked at the white walls with her timeless eyes. Jae also did not seem to have the urge to leave, look through the curtains or run out the door screaming as I did. I must have fallen asleep on the couch waiting for the phone to ring again. The touch of Naddalin Natalie's cold hands woke me briefly as she carried me to the bed, but I was unconscious again before my head hit the pillow.

I dug into my backpack and pulled out the crumpled, stained, completely empty packet of paper that had once been my math homework. I had dropped it at the bottom of my bag and forgotten about it - as I had done with most of my homework. The problem was that it was due today. I sighed and reached out to tap the shoulder of the girl sitting in front of

me. She turned, her blonde hair falling over her shoulder in a stream of molten gold.

'What?'

'Hey, Vivian,' I said, trying to keep my voice calm and even. Vivian was known to have a bad temper. Not to mention she was gorgeous, and both loved and hated by everyone at school. She gave me a contemptuous look. I swallowed; my mouth surprisingly dry. 'I forgot to do today's homework and was wondering if I could take a look at yours?' I held my breath. Vivian rolled her eyes.

'Do your homework yourself, Wendi,' she turned to the professor.

bitch. I thought as I stared at the back of his perfect head with daggers. Of course, she ignored me. She was sitting straight, her posture perfect, her hands clasped in her lap, with her bundle of clean homework in front of her. Just looking at her was enough to hurt me. My orange hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail, my homework was crumpled and dirty on the floor, and I sat slouched in my combat boots on the desk just because I knew Vivian would be annoyed.

'Jane?' asked my teacher. I winced at the name.

'Wendi,' I corrected her. I hated my first name - always hated it. It sounded like a grandma's name or a paper doll or something, and I had made sure to use my middle name since I was young.

'Okay, fine. Wendi.' She held out her hand to me for my homework. I could already see the disappointment on his face, the anticipation of my failure. I sighed.

'I didn't, Mrs. Wentworth,' I whispered. She said nothing but frowned and made a mark on her notepad.

That is how most teachers reacted when I did not do their homework: what more could you ask for from Wendi Madison, the wayward girl who lived with her alcoholic aunt in the seedy trailer park? McAuley had his prejudices against me. It was good. By the time I finished high school, I left this oppressive city with its talkative, judgmental residents and stagnant gene pool.

I think the last time we had someone new was when the Shezor moved in, and before that - shit, I did not even remember anyone before them. It has been so long.

Anyway, what I meant was that McAuley sucked. And the sooner I was done with this, the better.

I slammed my tray on the cafeteria table angrily. Iris, a short Japanese girl with long black hair and glasses, jumped up.

'Shit, Wendi. What was that for?

'Wentworth. That old cow.' I muttered angrily. Iris smiled.

'Looks like someone didn't do their homework.'

'You're so boring,' I said but managed to smile at the same time. Iris nudged me.

'Too bad I'm your only friend.' I teased her.

'It's not like it's any different with you!' I protested. She shrugged. I looked at her and saw a glint of pain in her eyes.

'If I had to sit by the dumpsters with anyone and breathe fumes of rancid garbage, it would be with you,' I promised her. That is right, we were seated at the back of the cafeteria, huddled in our little corner of the losers' table - affectionately called that by Iris because of its placement right next to the garbage cans. She put a hand on her chest and stared at me.

'Wow. That statement really warmed the deepest parts of my heart and soul,' she said sarcastically. I smiled Iris pulled a packet of



ketchup from her 'food' tray, if you could call it that, it was meat (hopefully) mixed in a pale orange sauce, taken sandwiched between two slices of bread and soggy sweet potato fries.

She put it on the table in front of her so that the seam was angled towards the ceiling.

'Iris-' I wanted to say, but she banged her fist on the table so hard that the table wobbled, and everyone stared at her. The ketchup burst from the packet and was thrown towards the ceiling, where it caught on and slowly dripped onto the floor a few feet away. Mr. Parker, the man watching our lunch break, looking for people trying to cause trouble - just Iris - turned around.

'Shit,' Iris muttered, grabbing the carton of ketchup, and reaching under the table, then smiling innocently as he approached. He passed right in front of us. 'Works every time.' She smiled and then flinched. 'Ouch! '

What?!' I asked.

'I cut my hand on the side of that damn table,' she whispered. And then she said,

'Shit. I am bleeding.'

I did not know it then, but those words would change my life.

(That Night)

"Just touch me," she grumbled, cupping his hand impatiently.

He could not keep any of them waiting any longer. Slowly, he lowered his middle finger and slid lightly over her folds. Jasmine tilted her head back. 'Oh my God, yes. continue. ' He did it again, this time sliding his fingertips over, collecting her moisture. He separated her with two fingers and found her, rubbing in small circles. She leaned against his lips and cried, then lost her way. The smell of her, the smell of her, the feeling of her being so close to him, skin-to-skin. Time and space no longer make sense. She is alone.'

He leaned over to kiss me, his fingers still moving rhythmically inside me, his thumbs circling and pressing. His other hand scooped my hair from my head and held it in place. His tongue mirrored the movements of his fingers, demanding me. My legs started to stiffen as I pushed his hand. He stroked his hand lightly, so I was pulled back from the brink...I came immediately, repeatedly, and fell apart under him...then I started building again...I came back to orgasm, calling his name. '

I hit my head against the glass and the heat beat my blood from where his tongue was driving me crazy.' My legs were bent against

his back, urging him to get closer, and as I rocked onto him, my hands wrapped around his head to keep him still. Feeling his rough satin hair clinging to my sensitive inner thighs was defiant, raising my awareness of everything around me...

'Teeth. She would do it for him, it would be hot, but since he wanted to, He gets into her before he leaves like a gun, he needs to keep contact to a minimum.

Of course, at the thought of her he grabs his hair and pulls him down, pressing her soft, plump curves against him. She Her skin was hot and wet from the orgasm. Her pussy was wet and open, ready for him, begging him as she spread her legs and reached for his erection. By his ear, she Whispered, 'Strength, please.'

'Two fingers went into her, and her eyes went back to her head. He started to have a steady rhythm as his tongue flickered on her., she could not stop her hips from rising to meet his thrust. Oh god, she rode on his hands and covered his face with her sex. That must be bad. She told herself to stop. She could not. Somehow, she found her hands tangled in his short hair. Her body curled up tighter, clutching his fingers so we knew she could hear him every time he drove back to her slippery voice.'

'It is better to have sex with him in bed than against the door. Now he knows what she likes, the motions that make her moan and gasp and stick her fingers into her shoulders.

He sits up and turns towards her Smiling, her eyes fell on her bright red panties. She thanked Maddie in her heart for letting her wear the matching bra and panty set. Then all thoughts of Maddie and anyone else left her mind. He went like a bolt of lightning as she moved, he took off those panties as he walked and threw them across the room. Then he started doing things to her with his fingers and mouth, almost knocking her out.'

But as he laughed, he was the first. Once she felt the hot liquid between her legs, it was pure blood like never before. 'That's it, that's it, dear,' he said. 'And you can't rebel against your master and master, Hamm?'

Now he undresses, takes out his hard, eager sex, and mounts her against her lap, continuing to stroke her for She works.

She twisted from side to side, kneading the soft sheets beside her into knots with both hands, her whole body turned pink, and her nipples were as hard as small stones. He could not resist them.

He bit them with his teeth, jokingly, without hurting her. He licked them with his tongue, then he licked her sex too, and he slowly mounted her as she struggled, blushed, and moaned under him.

Again, she arched her back. Her breasts were flushed red. He felt her tremble violently with reluctant pleasure as he inserted his organs into hers.

A terrible cry was muffled by the hand covering the mouth. She was shaking so violently; she was almost going to lift him on top of her.

## 22 Harts Flutter

My heart throbbed painfully in my chest. Short breaths that barely suppressed the need for oxygen escaped from my lips. My whole-body aches from the haunting memory that haunts my vision.

'Lily, here I come.' Melvin's voice whispered softly in my ear. His lips brushed against my skin.

I backed off. He is not there. Not before.

Cold fingers wrapped around my palm, pulling it away from my throat.

'You can breathe, honey. There's air.'

The spokes in the air felt damp, hot, and heavy. I was acutely aware of the shower, the hot water mist that warmed the entire bathroom. I am shivering. Every twitch in my shoulder trims the space my lungs can expand.

Melvin's dark eyes were in front of me, staring deeply at me. His hand was squeezing mine.

Can he squeeze sanity back into my body? Or at least some oxygen? He could put his hand on my head and squeeze the memory out of my mind forever.

Melchor told me that memory can be a prison. They keep you stuck in the past, keep you from being in the present, and blur your thinking about the future. I aspire to be Naddalin Natalie Shezor. Get rid of the past. She was luckier than she knew.

'You'll get through it, Lily Natalie-Black,' Melvin whispered, his hand cupping my cheek. 'I know you can.'

'Let me forget, Melvin.' Those words strained between my breaths. I stared at the vampire through blurry vision. 'Just let it go.'

'One day, Lily,' he whispered, resting his forehead against mine. He breathed out against my face, and I gasped. 'You won't be trapped in this sadness anymore.'

When cold hands rest on my hips, a shudder goes down my spine, pulling my body toward a perfect marble. The cotton dragged across my palm as I grabbed the fabric of his shirt.

'Three days.' I sighed. three days. three nights.

'We'll be fine, Lily.' Melvin's lips touched mine, his cool breath on my face.

'There's only so much I can do,' I muttered. For the past few weeks, I have neglected to do laundry and dishes, as well as many other chores. I rarely do it until Charlie and I are struggling to find a clean shirt or plate. Sleep is also something I avoid when I make up for lost time with Melvin. We spent most of the time curled up in my bed chatting. There is a lot to discuss. So much to protect me from the nightmares that occasionally plague me.

'I'll be back before you know it.'

His words made my heart skip a beat. Does he know how scared I am sometimes that he will leave and not come back? Will I wake up and realize this is a twisted, hellish nightmare that pops into my head?

Usually, Naddalin Natalie would hang out with me when Melvin was not around - even for a few hours. But this time, she went with him. I am not desperate enough to beg another Karen to be with me while they are gone - but.

'I'm being selfish.' My fingers tightened around his shirt as I spoke. I hope he does not have to go. I hope he does not have the animal instinct to hunt blood.

'It's my own fault.' He sighed, running his fingers over my shoulder. 'I should hunt more often.'

Melvin's dark eyes closed, and he took a deep breath, holding it in his lungs until I thought twice. He took my scent to heart for the millionth time. This is a habit he developed after our traumatic visit to Volterra. Without his modification, his memory could recall my scent in unnaturally perfect ways. But he always took a little extra time to remind himself before leaving me.

'Three days,' he whispered again, shaking his head. 'I will be back soon. Time flies—for both of us.'

I nodded, swallowing hard. I pretend I believe him. Time will drag on - for both of us.

Melvin chuckled and shook his head. 'I am just afraid of leaving you. Afraid of what trouble you will get in my absence.'

My eyes rolled automatically. 'I'll be fine, I haven't done anything adventurous lately.'



'That means Danger will have something ready for you soon.'

His lips touched my forehead. 'Do me a favor?' He looked at me, his black eyes meeting mine.

'Anything.'

'Please meet that idiot here.'

My jaw clenched, and I immediately regretted my commitment. 'Whether you like it or not, I'll go to Raush.'

Melvin had lost interest in my friendship with him after discovering that Jack was a wolf. If anything, the initial bitterness when I got back from Volterra delighted him. Recently, to Melvin's dismay, Chiaz and I have reconciled and are back on track with our regular gatherings in La Push. Jack called yesterday to plan, and I ended up being free this weekend.

'Please let go of Jack,' I said, although I regretted it almost immediately. I do not want to fight when he is leaving. Melvin's grimace kept me going. 'He's never done anything that could hurt me.'

'Naddalin Natalie can't see you there.'

'I'm as safe with him as with you.'

I did not add that Melvin disapproved of how much my friendship with Jack was Hypocrisy, as if he did not try to kill me in the first place out of a bloody lust for me. My safety with Jack does not

depend on my ability to not bleed - and I am bad at keeping my skin intact.

'Couples usually communicate over the phone. Not their sister's psychic abilities,' I added quietly, trying to lighten the mood. What mainstream relationship tips even apply to us as a couple?

Melvin sighed again and pulled me closer to him. 'Just—please, for me—be careful.' He read out every word. 'Call me if anything happens or you need me to get home sooner.' His voice was firm, and his fingers stroked my neck gently as he said the next words. 'I love you.'

'I love you too,' I muttered, feeling my cheeks heat.

'I'll be back soon.'

Before I could react, my hand fell to my side, and he had already left. My room feels empty. My body felt light when his hand disappeared. I felt almost weightless, as if gravity no longer applied to me without Melvin holding me in place.

'I'll wait.' I muttered to anyone.

Three days and three nights without Melvin. I know as much as anyone why Melvin needs to hunt, especially now that we are testing the boundaries of intimacy. Even the slightest loss of control meant I could be seriously injured. But every trip leaves me miserable and lonely, no matter the length of time. They brought back nightmares from a painful

and initially permanent absence from my life. This gave me a slight sense of self-loathing about my dependence on him.

I took a deep breath and shivered trying to push the depression out of my system. Jack will be here in a few hours, and I will spend the rest of the day with him at Rez. That would make me forget things. But today Charlie's gone, and I have been left alone until Jack arrives. I already know that I need to wash dishes and do laundry. There is also an English paper on Hamlet that is due. I usually like any excuse to reread the script, but today I was not in the mood.

I handed myself over to chores and homework, grabbed my thick hair and tied it into a low ponytail at the base of my neck. I set my phone to the loudest ringer setting and put it on the desk within arm's reach in case someone—especially Melvin—calls. Then, nearly tripping over a stack of books, I picked up a pile of dirty laundry in the corner of the room. I also laughed aloud as I went downstairs, thinking of Melvin's remarks about the imminent danger.

The dirty laundry was put away, cycled in the washing machine, and I started doing the dishes. Not as much as I hoped. Charlie must have done some before going fishing with Billy. Washing, drying, and putting away the dishes took less time than I expected. When I finished the laundry, the clothes were still spinning around in the machine.

I took the opportunity to sweep the kitchen floor and toss out the pile of newspapers in the living room.

Charlie's life is simple, which means there is not much to do around the house. Allison, who is as energetic as ever, always has a new messy corner of the house that needs to be sorted out. Whether it is her missing a new hobby of drying, or her giving up trying to rearrange furniture and organize some possessions.

Laundry is still going on despite my extra chores. I stood in front of the washing machine, arms crossed over my chest, eyes staring at the dagger, as if it would speed up the washing machine.

Charlie has already told me he plans to eat with Billy after fishing and I am planning to eat with Jack so no need to start eating to pass the time. Downstairs there is no other way but to carry clothes into the dryer. But going upstairs now means I must reread Hamlet or jump straight into the paper. I am not particularly eager to do it right now.

I stared at the machine for another minute before heading back to the kitchen. It did not take long for me to put together a grilled cheese sandwich, but it was long enough for the machine to beep. After the clothes are in the dryer, I grab my sandwich and go upstairs.

My copy of Hamlet — tattered after years of reading — is sitting on my desk among the piles of books and papers. Just settled in

bed, with my sandwich by my side and the bookshelf propped open in my lap, I hear my door creak.

The thought of being able to spend a few more hours with Jack makes me so excited. With a grin, I looked up. Fear of the cold immediately replaced my excitement.

It was not my tall, auburn-skinned best friend standing at my door, but another person. He was tall - as tall as Chiaz. His skin was pale—as pale as his blond hair. He leaned casually against the frame, his arms—thick muscles—crossed over his chest.

Hamlet slipped out of my hands, fell onto my mattress, and hit the floor. The man walked over, walking briskly, and picked up the book. I flinched when he approached me.

'Hamlet? One of my favorites,' he mused, his voice surprisingly low. He chuckled softly. 'I've been waiting for you for so long, but I never thought we'd have so much in common, Lily.'

I was frozen, shocked, and horrified as I stared. He did not mind my silence, he flipped through my book and smiled at the different passages.

'Who are you?' My voice was a soft whisper. I gulped heavily, trying to quell my fear and calm my heartbeat. It did not work. How long has this person been in my house?

My mind is running. Is the front door unlocked? a window?  
Charlie never leaves the door unlocked. Did Melvin check the door to  
make sure it was locked before leaving me alone?

Melvin. Melvin could not get far. But he had not come yet,  
which meant he was not close enough to hear about the encounter, and  
Naddalin Natalie did not see anything. Or she has, Melvin is on his way.

I looked around for my phone. It did not sound. Will Melvin  
call to warn me? tell me to run? tell me to hide?

My phone was not on the table before I went downstairs.  
Panic swept through, making my stomach twitch and my chest hurting.

I feel lonely. Lonely as Emilyn found me in the woods.

'For help?' he asked, and my eyes returned to his face. He  
sneered, and the corners of his reddish lips raised a smug look. 'No one's  
going to help you today. I am sure of that.'

Fear stung my heart. Melvin's fear, then my fear.

distract him. discourage him. Melvin's voice - the man who  
got me through his absence for months - whispered to me.

'There's no money in this house,' I whispered, my voice  
stronger now—barely. Fear stood still, shaking my words.

threaten him.

'My father is the chief of police.' The man shrugged. 'Trust me, Lily, I know.' He turned and placed my Hamlet neatly on the table where I had picked it up. 'I'm here for you.'

I wince and leave as the man approaches and sits on the bed.

'It is risky. I must say, Lily, you have a great relationship. Vampires and wolves are at your command. It is hard to do this safely. Well, for me.'

My eyes were on him, my stomach was twisted by his words. His eyes are pale blue. Although his skin was pale, there was an undercurrent of dark red. He is clearly not a vampire. But he is not of Quileute blood. He looks like a man.

'What do you want?'

'Play with you.' He smiled calmly, looking relieved, the nausea creeping through me. His hand slid across the bed, and I pulled my body away. 'I have been waiting a long time for this. I hope you appreciate the planning of it all, but it does not make sense for a cat to explain his paws before playing with a mouse.'

Panic swelled in my veins as I tried to find Some ways to escape this situation. He was closer to the door than I was. I had to get around him to get to the door. He is human. I could have hurt him. If I can do that, I must surpass him. I at least get outside screaming so someone

can help me. He is tall. He will run faster than me. I will travel with ease. I am not even sure if my voice will work, or my legs.

I was stuck in my head as I urged my body to move, fight, scream for anyone. But it does nothing. I felt like my muscles were like syrup, my mind was processing everything, but it was frozen.

His hand reached out, faster than I expected, around my ankle. His hands were tight and my automatic kicks to free myself were futile. He crawled up beside me and put his other hand on my chest. The force of it tingled in my chest, and my vision darkened as my head slammed into the headboard behind me.

I groaned as painful tendrils wrapped around my skull and vibrated every bone in my body.

threaten him.

'Melvin will kill you.' My voice was weak, and my vision blurred as the weight of his body weighed on me. Once I bleed, Pierre has no chance. It is the same thing.

Every breath hurts. Every tingle made me feel less willing to breathe again. I am trying to remember strategies I have used before. But nothing Pierre or Emilyn does is like that.



'I count on it.' His voice was confident. 'I cannot wait for Melvin to pick me up. I cannot wait for the leader of your Coven to come to me.'

Begging him.

'Please.' My hands touched my hips, and my arms were pinned as I tried to push them away. 'Don't do it. Please.'

'You smell. Holy.' He touched my face, and my body shuddered. It reminds me of the shiver I felt this morning before Melvin left. when he kisses me. This is different. quite different. 'I'm so happy to meet your witch, Lily.'

His warm hand caressed my chin and followed its line all the way to my neck. 'I have always been jealous of how Melvin plays with your hair. He loves it so much. He strokes it. Smell it. Breathe it.' He leaned over, and as he breathed against my hair, I felt sick and winced away. 'It is funny. You do not seem to mind - do not seem to understand that it is a predator, and it is marking what is his.' He chuckled and patted the lock of my hair. 'You're my mark now, Lily.'

I whimpered as his hands moved across my chest, adding to my pain. My legs and hips were pressed against his weight. My hands, free, groped over him, and he growled loudly.

'Enough.' He hissed, gnashing his teeth. One of his hands wrapped around my arm, pushing it under my knee, while the other grabbed my other wrist. I was sobbing and writhing, trying to free myself.

threaten him. lie to him. Protect yourself, Lily.

'You don't know what they're capable of.' I cried, tears pooling in my eyes as I realized I was at the mercy of the man who wanted to hurt me.

He smiled, cruel and confident. 'I know exactly what they can do.' He leaned down and moved closer to me until his breath was on my neck. 'I can do better.'

Fingers dug painfully into my hip, where Melvin's hand had been a few hours earlier. A vicious pain, worse than the searing pain in my torso or head, exploded on my skin. I did not notice the scream until it rang in my ear. He put his hand on my mouth, forced me to close my jaw, and silenced me.

The sound of the fabric is evident in the air. I burst into tears as his eyes flashed over mine. The nausea made me worse, I gagged at his hand, trying to grab his hand off me. Most desperately want to have his eyes gouged out of his skull.

A sob spilled from my closed lips, and I made up my mind and pushed him up with my arms. My cries were nothing more than

groans under his palms, and my attempts were pitifully thwarted by the pulsing pain in my body. I wish I would pass out now, but I can feel his every touch as his hands wander over me. I wrestled under him, wriggling on the muscle bands in his legs. This is completely futile.

Without the ability to fight or move, I was very aware of his body in me, the arrows of pain on my wrists and ribs, the blow to my head. I was very aware of the way his hands separated my legs and the feeling of his fingers curling around my thighs.

I scream. My throat is burning with every vibration. But he did not seem to mind.

For a split second—less than a second—his weight changed. I took my chance and kicked hard with my left leg. He was faster than me, avoiding my movements while instantly redistributing his weight, crushing me to the ground again.

He growled angrily. His eyes darkened as he forced me into the mattress of my bed. His palm was on my chest, and as I tried to recover from the throbbing, black spots appeared in my vision. The weight crushed my ribs and made breathing more difficult than anything else.

Please, Lily.

'Please, please.' I tried to beg. The voice became muffled. I fought against him, against the pain that radiated all over me, the panic in my blood, and his weight. But that is okay.

'Enough.' He spat. His hand left my mouth, and he sat up and straddled my waist. I took this opportunity to contort my body as I was painfully trying to free myself. I sobbed, gasped, and screamed at the same time. My palms burned as blood rushed back to my freed wrists and fingers.

'No, no, Lily.' His fingers wrapped painfully around my wrist again, pulling me toward the bed.

I do not know what hurts more - my wrist being grabbed by him, or the pain of my head hitting the metal headboard a second time. His hands fell hard on my torso, knocking every ounce of oxygen out of my lungs, and my body froze in shocking pain.

'Don't try that again.' He chuckled.

'Please.' I whispered weakly, panting heavily.

'It's not the way I want it to be,' he yelled angrily.

He grabbed my wrist with both hands and thought for a moment. 'There's beauty in victims who want to fight. I love it. It is poetic,' he said, shaking his head. 'I used to do this to my wife. She is

beautiful, much more beautiful than you, Lily. She used to fight me too, but she was weak. Easy to tame.'

He sighed again.

My head was pounding, and I was trying to catch his words as he spoke. My hearing feels hazy.

I remember the night I was surrounded in Big Sur. When Melvin saved me before it was too late. But now he is not here. It is too late.

The fog that enveloped my senses did not diminish my pain and consciousness. This is so torturous. My vision blurs with every suffocation.

Convince him.

'Please. I will not tell them. Please stop.' I whimper, my voice shaking. My jaw hurts every time I say a word.

'It is tempting. But if they do not know what I did, how do I kill them?' He chuckled. 'I love you begging. My wife used to beg. But she was easier. She begged but did not fight. You were fighting, making it difficult for both me and you.'

He stroked my cheek with his hand and wiped it away Tears on my cheeks. 'I need you to tell them, Lily,' he said softly. 'I need them to come after me.'

Fight him, Lily.

My cheeks were burning where his hands were. He wiped my tears and looked like he cared about me.

I breathe slowly, trying to calm myself down. Trying to control my sobbing and pain. If I can think, I can fight.

'I want you to feel it.' He snorted sadly. 'I'm ready,' I said. You have lived too long to be weak like my wife Lily. I do not want to use it, but I want to know, don't I?'

He was leaning against me, the shiny syringe in his palm. 'Rohypnol. Have you heard of it?' He pointed at the needle and looked remorseful.

All my composure was gone in an instant, my breathing became uncontrollable, and I cried, arching my back desperately to push him away. Trying to run away before he injected, I used That medicine.

He ignored me and continued talking. 'I have never used it with my wife. But she is easier, as I told you. My

body tensed as he pushed the needle into my abdomen in mid-March. The sting of the needle was strangely focused on the broken bone fragments vibrating around my body.

My vision blurred my tears, quickly deformed. Sharp colors distorted by tears softened. Tones barely separated until they merged. Hug

colors, my pain lessened. I was cold - like lying naked on ice. The ice covered the pain and drained my energy. I could not move, but I barely wanted to. I was so tired and confused by the color.

Do not give up.

It is easy to give up control, give up the fight, and ignore Melvin's voice in my head. I let the cold and darkness overcome me. I keep my eyes closed and my vision darkened with relief. I embraced the dreary sights around me that numbed my pain and suffering.

Against the background of my silence, all I know is that I want Melvin.

'Lily?!'

screamed loudly. Too noisy. My head was pounding with pain.

'Lily?!'

Too loud. Too noisy. The pressure exploded inside my skull, on my brain.

'Oh—oh my God! Lily!'

Too loud. too close. It hurts.

'Lily, wake up!' Hand on me. Hands caressing me. I want to scream. I want to fight. 'Open your eyes! Please—open your eyes! Open your eyes, Lily!'

I tried. I tried to open my eyes and mouth so he could leave me. Stop screaming. Make it painless.

'Wait, Lily. Wait--wait.' He was in pain. His voice was full of the pain I felt.

Pain erupted in my body, and I could feel my painful cries vibrate in my pounding head. I tried to force my eyes open, but everything was watercolor. Brown, blue, and white stripes. The colors swayed and blended, making my stomach churn and my eyes hurt.

'You'll be fine. Just—wait a minute. Okay? Please. You will be fine.' The voice was pleading. Loud,

I was being jostled and moved and I felt so sick. Why don't they understand it is painful? Why is everything so painful?

I envy the dead. I envy dead girls.

When I opened my eyes again, the watercolors were brighter. They were so bright my eyes were burning with pain. I can feel the light even behind my eyelids.

'Oh dear!'

'That's it.'

'Sir, what happened? Sir?'

'I need help! Please!'



screamed even more. More please. More begging. He likes to beg. more pain. More screaming. Too noisy. Everything is too loud.

'Put her here.'

'No, no!' so loudly. The sound is so loud. 'Don't touch her! Stay away from me! No!'

'Put her down and let me take care of her.'

I knew the voice. The voice had never been angry, but now it was. It is also very loud. It hurts.

'No! Find someone else! No, no, no! It is him! He did it!'

'He's not here now,' said the angry voice.

Both sounds need to stop being so loud. I am sleepy. I want the pain to stop. I want to dim bright lights.

'Chiaz, put her down, now...'

My head was about to explode. I am going to be sick. I wanted to open my eyes and tell Chiaz to stop. Stop moving me, stop shaking me.

'Lily, I'll take care of you, sweetheart.' Another voice. Not Chiaz's voice. Very peaceful. It is soft. It was finally quiet. I want them to take me away from pain. It was so painful.

'I know it hurts.' It was soft. 'I'll give you some medicine to help you.' The

movement stopped. But my pain is not.

'I need an IV.'

'Lill, can you open your eyes?'

'Do an ultrasound of me. Internal bleeding.'

'I need a faster IV!'

'Lill, can you listen? Should I speak?' There

were too many voices. too much sound. I wanted to scream for them to stop, but I was acutely aware of the throbbing pain in my jaw.

'This is an ultrasound, Dr. Shezor.'

Dr. Shezor. My mind seems dull. I know that name. Melchor?

'Head injury. We need CT.' The voice was louder, angrier.

Yes. Melchor

My eyes snapped open to the dazzling light when panic suddenly came over me. He will know. He is going to have a look.

'No.' My own voice was so loud that I winced. The whole room was spinning - faces and colors blurred so fast I could not orient myself.

'Lill, it's all right, you're in the hospital.'

No.'

'Lily,' Melchor's voice was soft, quiet, close. 'You're safe. You are with me,' he told me. My eyes swept across the room, trying to

determine where he was. The color of his blond hair is so familiar I wince until he speaks again. 'I know it hurts. I am going to make it stop.'

I wanted him to take me away from the pain and the lights. Make it all go away again. Everything hurts.

A small sob came out of my lips. His angelic figure is watery and indistinct. I could barely see his bright hair flickering in the light as he moved.

'I'm going to have an ultrasound, it won't hurt.' He agreed gently.

'I'm cold.' My tongue felt swollen and heavy in my mouth. I cannot form words correctly.

'Lill, you are all right. We will give you some painkillers.'

Someone stroked me, pressing uncomfortably against my hip.

My breath was punched, and I heard the echo of my screams in my ears. This time my body listens to me, trying to ignore the black dots that block my vision as I move. But my body broke down before I could do anything. My muscles are too weak. My bones are also broken. My vision is too blurry. My stomach churned as the room swirled.

'No, no.' My jaw hurts every time I say a word. I cannot breathe.

Why does it hurt so badly?

'Please, no, no, no. Please.'

'Enough.' The word made my heart pound, and it just made my body fight more with the hands and the pain.

'Lily.' Melchor's voice was right next to me. 'You're safe. You are fine. You are in the hospital.'

His voice was muffled. I am about to suffocate. I cannot breathe.

'I can't breathe.' I gasped. I am begging.

The pressure in my chest darkened my vision.

'Decreased breath sounds on the left, Dr. Shezor. Did she puncture her lung? Pneumothorax?'

'Lily,' Melchor breathes. 'I am going to take care of you. Take slow, deep breaths for me, Lily.'

Icy hands were touching me. My eyes close, shutting out the watercolors. He said I was safe. I moan, trying to arch away from the cold.

'You're okay, Lily.'

'This is going to pinch a little, darling.' Another voice says. It was right. A sharp string in my side makes me squeeze my eyes shut with a startled cry.

'It hurts.' I protest, my voice incoherent even to my own ears.

Little stabs of pain shot through my whole body as I tried to move away, but my body was too heavy. The pressure in my chest frustrates me. The icy hands keep moving. They are there, making me shiver. Then they are gone, making me grateful for the warmth until they come back again.

They were talking. My vision was bright and blurry, the pressure in my chest easing. The pain was gone, too. With bewildered relief, I lie still as the cold hands keep working.

'The police down here.'

'Bleeding into her abdomen. She needs surgery.'

'No.' I whimpered. There was pressure building in my chest, pressing down on my lungs and throat. I did not want surgery. I did not want the police.

'Melchor.' I slur his name, not sure if he could even hear me.

'You're doing so well, Lily. Just a little longer.' he tells me. He is close to me. His voice is close to my ear.

'I'll call the OR.'

The pressure was building, sending a stab of pain deep through me. I groan, gasping for air as the pain recedes.

'She's conscious. Should we do a rape kit now?'

The words are muffled, and I am almost sure they did not exist until I heard them again. Cold dread floods through me.

I did not want it again. I did not want that again. He said I was safe.

'No. Melchor, please. Do not.' It hurt to cry, and the pain made me cry harder. The pressure made me cry harder. 'Please, no.' I am cringing away again, feeling his cold hands holding me down.

'I'm so sorry, Lily.' Melchor voice was quiet in my ear, remorseful. 'Sedate her.'

Another sharp pain in my side. The same side he injected me. I gasped, feeling as if I could not breathe.

'I'm so sorry, Lily.' Melchor whispers.

The edges of my vision were black, and I could not move as more hands touched me.

'No.' My voice is slurred, even to my own ears. The weight of my body crushes in on itself, and the pain - though fading - is dragging me under with it. My eyes close against my will - muted colors turning to pure black.

'Sleep, Lily.' Melchor tells me. 'Let me take care of you now. No one is going to hurt you anymore.'

I want to tell him no. I want to tell him to take me away. I do not want to be here. I do not want it to hurt. I try to form words on my tongue, but I am under a hundred pounds of sand.

I hear Melchor's voice as I lose my grasp on reality.

I was aware of the coolness covering my body before anything else. Someone had covered me in a sheet of ice - perfectly molded to fit every crevice and curve of my body. Ice is unable to melt against the warmth that once existed in my skin.

There was a buzzing in my ear that was entirely aggravating, but unable to be quelled by anything. My body felt absolutely fatigued, and my mind dragged sluggishly after it.

Moronically, and quite morbidly, I wondered if this was what insects felt like when put in the freezer. Sluggish. Fatigued. Dead.

I wondered if I would ever slip past the fatigue long enough to get up and grab a blanket. I could call Charlie and he would grab one for me. If Melvin were with me - and the source of the ice - he would get me one faster and more silently than Charlie could. But if Melvin was the cause, why didn't he notice me shivering?

With a bitterness I despised, my mind races to our previous conversation. He was hunting. Of course, he was not here now.

I could just curl up into a tight ball and try to sleep. Then no one - I included - needed to be bothered with grabbing the blanket.

Just like those poor insects, I was well on my way to death, it seemed.

'Lill, darling, can you hear me?'

Yes, of course I could. You were practically screaming in my ear. Did no one understand the concept of talking at a reasonable volume? I thought we would all learn that in preschool.

'Open your eyes, dear.'

But I try. Because if I could open my eyes, then I could open my mouth and tell the voice to shut up. My muscles are slightly more cooperative than I expect, considering that I was a frozen bug on my way to death.

When I do open my eyes, I am faced with a dark room. Everything was blurry - all the shapes and colors blending into soft hues. The dull colors hardly quaked the nausea I suddenly felt. The room was shaking like an earthquake was ravaging McAuley, Washington.

That was strange.

I was elevated - the surface beneath me folding up to prop my torso up - and now that my eyes were open, I could see that there was no ice covering my body. I was just cold.



'Ah, it's good to see those eyes open.' The same voice from before said. It was much quieter now. I turn my head, wincing immediately at the pain I felt as I did so. Blinking as the pain receded, I watched the colors separate into slightly distinct objects. White walls. Pink vinyl chairs. Tan doors.

A woman was standing at the foot of my bed. She was holding a strange, grey-colored binder. Her blonde hair was pulled tight, her face in a strange sort of scowl that enhanced her wrinkles.

'How are you feeling?' Her voice was not soft, and I flinched.

My mouth feels like someone stuffed cotton balls into it. I ran my tongue over my lips, noticing how dry and cracked my whole mouth felt.

'You took a long while to wake up.' The woman says. She was wearing mint green scrubs. 'Don't move your shoulder.'

I blink slowly, my thoughts flurry as I process her dramatic words.

What happened to my shoulder?

The bluntness of her voice wrapped up with her scowl makes my stomach twist.

I stare at her, remembering her scrubs. Was she a doctor? A nurse? Has she introduced herself? I could not remember.

Did she tell me what happened to my shoulder? I had not broken it, had I?

'Water. Please.' My throat burned, and my voice was hoarse and slurred. Judging by the lack of response, I am sure I was hardly comprehensible and much too quiet. Did my shoulder injury impact my throat? Or other way around. How would my throat break my shoulder?

I never paid enough attention to the anatomy section of Biology. I was more focused on getting sick.

'You gave us quite a scare.' The woman says, though her voice is curt, and the words feel strange coming from her. 'Well, can you tell me what happened?'

发生了什么？ I swallow thickly, grimacing as I realize the pain was present again. I did not remember being sick or having a sore throat or breaking my arm.

I gave her - or, rather, us - quite a scare. I did not know what she could mean.

My eyelids fell shut, realizing with an exhausting breath that I was both confused and tired. It was difficult to focus on being confused

when I was this tired. But it was difficult to get myself tired when I had questions.

The woman with the scowl also had questions, and she was not letting up.

'Lill? It is imperative that I know what happened.' I open my eyes, but they fall shut again. She was not looking at me. She was looking at the binder and talking mostly to herself. The words faded in and out. 'Luckily, you have not showered. Collect DNA. You were unconscious before. Did not need consent.'

My shoulder. Something on my shoulder. I open my eyes, blinking as I try to clear away the distorted colors again. The colors were shifting, moving.

'Some more morphine. and then I will get the exam done easily.' The woman taps my arm. 'Are you in pain, Lill?'

'Nurse Wicker, I can take this from here.'

I blink again, watching as a new person with striking blonde hair and pale skin entered the room. Melchor.

The woman - the nurse - jumps, looking startled. 'Oh, Dr. Shezor, I didn't hear you come in.'

He smiles in response.

'I just need to take her vitals.' She continues, reaching for something beyond my head. My eyes shift to Melchor, he is watching me with a cautious expression.

'I can do that, thanks.' Melchor offers in a gentle, yet firm voice. 'Is this her file?'

The nurse looks defiantly at him, her fingers curling around the binder more tightly. She seemed to have abandoned the thing she was reaching for. 'I'm assigned to her case.'

Melchor pauses, smiling. 'I appreciate that. I will page if you are needed.'

The nurse huffs as she hands over the binder, turning on her heels. I watch her body get blurrier as she walks away, her mint green scrubs blending into the tan and white of the walls. The door shuts loudly behind her when she leaves, and I flinch again as the noise pounds into my head.

Melchor moves closer to me, pulling up a chair and sitting down. 'I must apologize, Lily. I intended to be here when you woke but I was caught in a meeting.' Melchor shakes his head slowly. 'Though, I believe, Nurse Wicker had something to do with your waking when I was busy.'

I stared at him, quizzically, not understanding his words. I was too tired to ask him to explain, though, when he continued.

'Let's not worry about her for now.' He frowns, his eyes flickering to mine momentarily.

Melchor reaches past my field of vision, procuring a plastic cup with a white straw. Relief floods through me as I realize how dry my mouth and tongue feel, and he guides the straw to my mouth.

I sip greedily, trying to ignore as my throat protests with each gulp. The water is at room temperature and does little to soothe my throat.

Melchor's hand sweeps across my forehead, and I shiver against his cold touch.

'You were running a slight fever before, but it is going now. That is a good sign.' He murmurs gently. 'Are you in any pain?'

My throat. My throat hurts. I want to immediately blurt it out, but my muscles feel like molasses. I really did not want to speak.

'You had surgery, Lily.' Melchor says, as if he could read my mind. 'The breathing tube will have made your throat a bit sore.'

Had Melchor and Melvin switched gifts recently? Moreover, how was he able to read my mind?

'Karly is making you some soup to help the soreness.' He continues, moving the cup away. 'I am sure she will bring some soon. We

certainly did not expect to have you awake so soon, but I am pleased you are.'

'It doesn't hurt that much.' My voice was a horse whisper. My wince coinciding with my words must have given my lie away.

'She's not put out, Lily.' He smiles, chuckling quietly. 'How do you feel?'

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the steady beeping of monitors. My head was hurting - from the annoyance of the sounds.

'My shoulder.' I whispered, though even I heard disbelief in my voice. My shoulder did not hurt. Nothing hurt - except my head and my throat. 'She said. I do not remember.'

Melchor smiles softly, reaching to touch my arm. 'It's just a blood pressure cuff.' He murmurs. 'You must have been moving when we were trying to get a reading.'

The Velcro makes my head pound as it is stripped off itself. Then Melchor slides the cuff off my arm, showing it to me.

'Oh.' I mumble, feeling utterly ridiculous and slightly embarrassed. A blood pressure cuff. 'The beeping.'

'Heart monitor.' He responds gently. He understood my frustration at the beeping because he eventually reached above me, turning

the monitor off. The room dims as the illumination of the monitor disappears from the room.

'Oh.' I swallow thickly, feeling even worse. 'I thought - she said not to move.'

I closed my eyes, wishing I understood more of what was happening. I had been to the hospital plenty of times - but I do not ever remember waking up in one with little recollection of why I was there.

I open my eyes, watching Melchor as he watches me with tightened eyes.

'Lily, do you know where you are?' His voice was casual, and he leaned back in his chair slowly. My eyes crawl over the vinyl chair and then back over my body under the ice blanket.

I blink once, and then repeatedly. Nothing quite made sense. 'McAuley Hospital.'

I felt strangely queasy. I did not smell blood, though. Still, I took slightly more tentative breaths, prepared to hold my breath if needed.

Melchor reaches out, touching his fingers to my wrist. 'Yes, you are.' His voice masked with pain. Melchor could not hide his compassion if he tried, and he rarely tried. 'Do you know why you're here?'

My thoughts flickered back to the nurse and her warning not to move my shoulder. It was just a blood pressure cuff, though. Not at all what I imagined it was.

I tried to remember - what had I done? What landed me in the hospital with a stay that required surgery and left me with a splitting headache and a sore throat. The pounding of my head almost mocked me - nearly encouraging me to try and think and make it hurt more.

A fuzzy memory popped into my head - Melvin, standing before me, instructing me not to get hurt.

I moan, closing my eyes. If my eyes stayed closed, the room would stop shaking. 'Melvin is going to be so worried.' I open my eyes, trying to glance around the room. I could barely make out anything behind Melchor. 'Where is he?'

'He's on his way.' Melchor tells me easily. 'He was hunting.'

'He told me not to get hurt.' I grimace as I speak the words. Of course, this would happen. Of course, he would leave me, and I would end up in the hospital. He would not ever let me out of his sight again.

### 23 Washed Out Colors

'Do you want him to come here?' Melchor asks slowly, his eyes slightly bewildered.



I shrug, then wince as pain rushes through my body. Now something hurts other than my head and throat. Everything hurt. I glance at my body nestled beneath the blankets. Nothing looked strange or out of place - but it was not the normal, sore pain I was used to with my frequent accidents and clumsiness.

'Lily?'

'No, it is better that he comes. He will be anxious.'

'And you?'

I stare at Melchor, not understanding his question or his baffled tone. 'You have to take my vitals.' I murmur finally, wanting some sort of distraction for myself and for Melchor. He was watching me. Waiting for me to speak, to answer his question.

He nods, rearranging his features to remove any signs of his confusion. 'Yes, I suppose I do need to do that.' He stands up, reaching for the binder that was placed on the foot of the bed. He pulls a pen from his jacket, scribbling some notes onto the papers. 'Are you in any pain?'

'My throat.' I mumble, and then I immediately flood with embarrassment. I had already complained about that once. 'My head, too.' I add quickly, as if that would pull his attention away from my repetition.

I lift my wrist, reaching up to touch my head. But my hand and wrist were covered in a thick white cast, shifting my attention from my headache. A small breath of shock escapes my lips.

Melchor moves to my side instantly, gently taking my encased hand in his.

'You have a concussion, Lily.' He says slowly. His fingers rub small circles on the exposed parts of my fingers as I stare at my hand.

My fingers tremble slightly, and my stomach churns. 'You said - the nurse.' I whisper, feeling hot tears pooling in my eyes.

'It is a small fracture in your wrist. It will heal easily.'

I shake my head, trying to will the tears away while also trying to remember how I had broken it. My mind seemed utterly blank. Void of any memories connected to my wrist.

'I do not - I cannot. I cannot remember.' I whisper, frantically. 'Why? Why can't I remember?'

'What do you remember, Lily?' Melchor asks me gently.

I swallow thickly, feeling overwhelmed by the confused emotions rushing through me. I close my eyes, a strange sense of betrayal washing over me as my tears fall onto cold cheeks. They made my vision blur in a way that discomforted me immensely.

What did I remember?

The nurse. With her cold eyes and thin-set lips and curt voice. My headache - splitting and heated. The icy coldness of my body as I awoke. Watercolor images. Pictures blurred together in a strange way.

'What's that?'

How did I explain the dull colors that made no sense? I looked at Melchor, opening my mouth to explain, but I was not sure how to. Looking at him, through my tears, sends my heart into a frenzy. It takes me a moment to realize that the drum in my ears is not one Melchor is playing.

With a jolt of pain in my stomach, I dimly remember the blonde hair of someone else. And the pain I begged to disappear - begging Melchor, begging Chiaz, begging someone else.

I pull my hand from Melchor's grasp, feeling as if he was squeezing it too hard. My wrist seared with pain, though his grasp was light and easily pushed away.

'Lily,' Melchor says gently. 'Breathe.'

There was an erratic beeping in my ears. I wanted to pound my hands against my ears to make it stop. I yank my hand furiously, wanting to wipe the traitorous tears from my eyes. Except there is a tugging on my hand that is entirely unpleasant and makes me freeze in place.

A thin, clear tube was running beneath the layers of bandages wrapped around my hand.

'Take it out!' My throat burned with every word, but my head hurt more. Pressure threatened to make my entire skull explode with every word I screeched.

The memories flood back into my brain. A tsunami of pain, of fear, of helplessness. The look of enjoyment and the depth of peace in his eyes as he tormented me. And watercolors. Dulled, watery colors. And a drug that induced them.

My hands fly to my stomach, feeling a pin-prick pain before I remember the drug is in my hand now.

'Take it out!' I plead, my cast hand hovering over my other, my fingers grasping the tube. Melchor's cool fingers pull them away. 'I want to leave.' My voice trembles with the shivering of my body. 'Take me home. Melchor, take me home.'

But not home. Do not ever take me back to that house. I never want to go back.

'Lily, listen to me,' Melchor urges, his finger on my chin so I would look at him. I wanted to rip the tube out myself, and I could barely scrape my eyes away from my hand to look at Melchor.

'Take me home. I want to go.' I beg, my sore throat a long-forgotten pain. I wrathfully wipe my cheeks, brushing away stinging tears as quickly as they were falling. My hands were shaking - my bones turning to ice within my body and freezing me from the inside out. I wanted to scream - I could not see with my tears, and I could not brush them away with my shaking hands.

'There's no needle, Lily. It is just a plastic tube, that is all.' Melchor professes knowledgeably. His fingers stroked my cheeks, helping me wipe away my tears. 'It is saline to keep you hydrated and morphine to help with your pain. Nothing more.'

'I don't want it.' I plead, hiccupping a sob. 'Take it out.'

Melchor was lying. There was no way I could be in this much pain if I had morphine in my IV.

The air around me seemed entirely too hot, and each breath scorched my lungs. I shoved his hand away from my face, crying out as it hurt to move so suddenly.

Melchor eventually nods slowly, his golden eyes watching me pitifully. 'Alright.'

His resignation shocked me for a moment, and then I turned immediately to desperation. I shove my hand at him, and he reaches for the tubing connecting my hand to the IV bag, detaching the two.

'No.' I protest, shaking my head, feeling the betrayal return with uncontrolled force. 'No. All of it. Melchor, please. Take it all out.'

Melchor hesitates now, looking pained. He grasps my hand in both of his, squeezing. I flinch, violently yanking my hand back.

My stomach rolls with nausea as phantom fingers crawl over my broken wrist, squeezing it until pain explodes within. My head hurts then, at the back, as if I had banged it against something hard. I knew I had not moved, though.

I wrap my IV-ridden hand over my cast, rubbing it to push the pain away.

'Lily, the IV is so we do not have to constantly inject you with needles. You need pain medicine and antibiotics.'

'No.' I shake my head, ignoring how much the movement increased the churning of my stomach. 'No medicine.'

He was wiping my face again. I am not sure why - I was crying so much it did not help at all.

'You had surgery. You need it or you will be in pain, sweetheart.'

I flinch at his words. Sweetheart. Had he ever called me that before? I could not remember. I squeeze my eyes shut, as if that would push away all the hurt and pain.

'Please.'

Melchor looks reluctant, but he cages. His fingers start working at the tape and gauze holding the tube in my hand. A sob of relief escapes my lips, and my head drops against my pillows.

'Better?' he asks softly. I pull my hand to chest, grateful that the tugging of the IV tubing is gone, replaced only by a slight stinging where it once had been.

I nod, swallowing thickly. No more medicine. No more needles.

My chest hurt, but the air was cooling. I close my eyes again, wanting the darkness to envelop the pain the way it enveloped me before.

'I want to go.'

'I think that's wise.' Melchor says quietly after a long pause. 'Your father will be coming soon. He should see you first.'

'Don't take me back.' A shudder rolls over my spine, thinking back to my room. It had been my sanctuary. My space. The place Melvin and I grew to know each other. I never wanted to go back there again. I open my mouth to clarify - do not take me back home, but please take me out of here. But Melchor responds before I can.

'We won't.' He promises. 'Lily.' He hesitates, battling himself. 'Do you remember?'

My stomach churns. 'It is blurry. watercolors' My voice is strained, and my eyes hazy with tears again. My fingers kneed at my cast, rubbing away the pain.

Melchor is silent for a long time, and I must open my eyes to ensure he is still in the room with me. He is a statue, on the chair, watching me.

'You should get some rest.' He finally says. 'Your father will be here shortly.'

My heart beats with a bizarre feeling of rejection. His response - even delivered in his soft voice - still rang with dismissal.

'Melchor?'

He looks at me, waiting.

'you said. With the nurse. That this was her fault.'

He grimaces, turning away as he speaks. 'I apologize, Lily. I should not have spoken ill of her.'

'Why?'

He turns to me, looking remorseful. 'I suspect she wants the inside information before anyone else.'

'She won't.'



'Your file will be safe in my office - away from prying eyes.'

He offers reassuringly. 'It'll remain there, and I'll have her off your case immediately.'

'I remember. talking. before.' I cringe, remembering the muffled words that carried.

Melchor nods. 'Yes - I have spoken to them already. Both Melvin and Naddalin Natalie are confident they can be trusted. If anything gets out, we will know.'

'Naddalin Natalie?' I feel the blood drain from my face. I looked sharply. Why hadn't Naddalin Natalie seen what happened? Why hadn't she helped me? 'She didn't see.'

Melchor frowns, squeezing my fingers in his reassuringly. 'She didn't know what happened until you were already here.'

I gulp. My mind racing through what I could remember of being here. I shiver, remembering the loud voices and the anger vibrating from Chiaz's body to me. 'Jake?'

'He left as soon as I took you from him.'

I close my eyes, feeling the fatigue stronger now.

He left. Chiaz left.

'Sleep, Lily. We will have time to talk later.' Melchor tells me tenderly. He pats the blankets around my trembling hands.

Neither of us say anything more.

My mind is scattered with fragments of pain and screaming, reflecting images of a pale man with blue eyes against my closed eyelids.

I am unsure of whether Melchor has left the room until he is pressing a warm towel to my forehead and mopping tears, I had not realized I was shedding a soft napkin.

I am not sure when the images bridge to dreams, but they hold me captive in terror either way.

The words as a sharp snarl from my mouth. Naddalin Natalie looks at me, her expression completely masking the terror in her thoughts. She pressed the gas pedal down the furthest it could go. The needle of the speedometer was just beyond the highest painted tick mark, indicating the car was going over the maximum of 155 miles per hour.

Naddalin Natalie pushed her foot down harder, and none of us missed the groan of the metal under her foot. Even Dejen was getting frustrated in the back seat.

Naddalin Natalie's thoughts were a furious storm of visions. How she had missed a decision that endangered Lily's life, no one knew. But now she was searching for every remote possibility - looking years into the future - ensuring Lily survived. The results were infuriatingly unclear.

'You cannot show up on foot, Edward. What will Charlie think?'

'It doesn't matter.' I snarled in response.

'You can't see her if you're freaking dead, Melvin.' Dejen had grabbed my arm, physically holding me in place. 'The Chief's going to kill you unless you have an alibi.'

I laughed maniacally, imagining the Chief with his gun trying to hunt me down. If only he knew.

'The only logical conclusion would be that you were close enough to walk. Which means you were close enough to do this to her. You need an alibi. You need to be out of town.' Naddalin Natalie insisted. 'You need to arrive when Lily is out of surgery - after her father is there, after the news has spread. We will drive.'

I surrendered, knowing Naddalin Natalie and Dejen were entirely right. Charlie would attempt to blame the entire situation on me and arrest me on the spot if I did not have solid proof that I was out of town.

It was decided by Naddalin Natalie that we would drive to Spokane to camp. Karly met us in Dejen's jeep and then we drove. Not toward McAuley Hospital, toward Spokane. We collected receipt

documenting food, gas, motel reservations, and even a camp site ticket. If the police needed proof, we would have it.

'None of the timings correspond to our story.' Naddalin Natalie had said, her mind racing as she thought of gaps in our tale. Dejen, sitting in the back, rubbed ink off, spilled coffee, and tore receipts until they corresponded with our plan.

It was massively frustrating - meeting Karly in Ellensburg, taking the car she had brought, and slowly driving down to McAuley again. Each stop at a motel or gas station, waiting as Naddalin Natalie refueled a full car, destroyed me. But there was little I could do.

'Hurry up.' I spit through ground teeth.

Naddalin Natalie's visions were flashing through my mind - Lily dead in her room. Lily dead in the hospital. Lily dead in the woods. Lily dead in Volterra.

'Enough!'

Naddalin Natalie did not hear me. She was grappling with her visions. Why hadn't she seen Lily was in danger? Why hadn't she seen a decision made that put Lily in danger? Why was she seeing these visions now?

Lily dead in the meadow.

'Stop!'

Naddalin Natalie jumps at my voice, her concentration interrupted. 'I don't understand.'

'Fifty visions of Lily.' I choke on the word. She was not dead. Melchor said she was not.

'I don't understand.' Naddalin Natalie whispers again, shaking her head.

'Believe me, it's illustrative enough.' I snarl. 'Dejen, call Melchor.'

Dejen pulls his phone out without a word, dialing quickly. I soak up Melchor's voice as the two converse. Lily was fine. Her injuries were not life threatening. She was out of surgery.

Naddalin Natalie's vision masks mine. Lily in her bedroom, bleeding, in pain.

Someone was going to pay for her blood.

The moment I had seen Naddalin Natalie's vision - Lily writhing in pain in Melchor's ER - I had waged war against the Mutts. I could perfectly see it in my mind, my plot constructed in a fraction of a second and executed within the hour. I would run to La Push and single-handedly destroy the mutt that Lily called her friend. I would destroy anyone who got in my way, anyone who tried to protect him, and anyone who tried to stop me. They could not win when I could anticipate their

every move before they did it. They could not rival my anger. The monster in me was filled with glee. Their blood did not tempt me but killing was not against my instincts as a vampire.

The soul and heart Lily's love emanated for was not repelled. I was not a monster - I was riding the world of monsters. Those mutts deserved it. They were accusing us of harming humans when their rap sheet was becoming if ours.

Melchor was quick to pull me from my fantasy. His call came only moments after Lily arrived - quickly urging us to return home. In a rush to get to surgery he scarcely had time to explain that Chiaz Naztherth had been to accuse me of the crime when he had brought Lily to the hospital. Melchor had not told us what happened, but it was painfully clear from Naddalin Natalie's vision. The thought of it made me sick - a feeling I had not experienced in a century. In learning of his innocence, I could not channel my emotion onto Chiaz Naztherth's murder.

Just six hours I had been away. The thought made me more furious than I could stand. Six hours unprotected was all it took.

I wince, my hand gripping the plastic of the door handle so tightly it cracks.

Lily dead in her car.

We were only miles away from town, and Naddalin Natalie rammed the car down to eighty miles an hour. I seethed at her, wanting to break the door off and run to the hospital. I would be there in a quarter of the time.

As if he could read my mind, Dejen puts his hand on my shoulder. 'Don't even think about it.' He warns, raises an eyebrow.

I shoved his hand away, snarling. 'Drive faster, Naddalin Natalie.'

Naddalin Natalie shouts at me with a glare. You know I want to get to her as much as you do. But we must maintain our image for now.

Naddalin Natalie's mind was a swirl of potential futures for us, but she was utterly inhibited by her concern over why she had not had a vision prior to Lily arriving at the hospital. She was furious with herself, and terrified. What other things had she missed?

I wondered the same question.

I could only think that Chiaz Naztherth was not as innocent as he seemed. He was there, conveniently blocking Naddalin Natalie's visions. He had been involved.

I would hunt him down to find out. The mutt would not be able to hide his thoughts when he saw me.

Naddalin Natalie pulls up to the small garage of the hospital, smoothly pulling into a spot close to the door. I was out of the car before she had thrown it into gear.

Decades of training to act like a human gave me enough insight not to run at full speed, but I was close to breaking every human-trained instinct of mine now. Melchor might berate me for not acting human, but I cared little for my own welfare in this moment.

I could smell her blood. A floral essence gone bitter from seeping out of her body.

Dejen catches up to me easily, laying his large hand on my shoulder again and yanking me to slow me down. I do not shake him off this time. Even though I knew I might need him to restrain me.

'Karly is in Melchor's office. Let us wait there for now.'

Naddalin Natalie tells me as she glides over. She is more collected than we are, but only in physical form. Her eyes now reflect the panic of her thoughts. Panic that ruminates through my entire body.

I should not have left. I knew better than to leave. Not with Victoria on the run still. Not weeks after narrowly escaping death by the Voltari. Not with tension from the wolves due to our return. There was too much. Too many loose ends. Too many enemies.

I should not have left.



I follow stiffly after Naddalin Natalie, pushed along by Dejen. I could smell the lingering scent of the Mutt as we walked. He had, as Melchor said, brought Lily here. But he did not stay.

How could he leave?

My eyes were focused on Melchor's thoughts - watching him scribble notes from the surgery onto papers in Lily's folder.

'Vanessa, I'm assigning you to Lily's case.'

'Dr. Shezor, doesn't the chief normally handle assignments?'

Vanessa, a young, innocent PA, asks.

'I'll deal with him.'

'Do you have her chart?'

'Document her stats in your notebook for now.' Melchor says, leaving her. Lily's folder was sealed away in his office.

'How bad?' I say under my breath. I knew he could hear me.

I will be up in a moment. He responds.

Naddalin Natalie opens the door to Melchor's office. Karly was pacing the length of it, her expression one of horror.

'Melvin,' she breathes, her eyes full of tears.

'How is she?' I demand. 'Have you seen her yet?'

Karly shakes her head sadly. 'I only just got here. Melchor said she was awake, but he sedated her again.'

My hands turn to my fists at my side. Not only had she been alone when the attack happened - with no one to protect her - but she had woken up and found herself without me yet again.

'Jae and Vivian have gone to Lily's house. They are trying to see if they can track the scent.' Karly says, spying on Dejen and Naddalin Natalie. 'You may want to go, too.'

Naddalin Natalie shakes her head defiantly. 'I need to be here. Charlie will need me.'

'I'll go.' Dejen stands up, his muscles bulging. 'He's a dead man the second I have him within my sights.'

'Make him suffer.' Naddalin Natalie hisses. Torture him until he regrets it.

My stomach twisted in conflict, wanting to accompany Dejen, and wanting to stay and see Lily.

That monster, whoever he was, hurt my mate. My Lily. I needed to be the one to destroy him.

I twitch as Dejen leaves, desperately wanting to follow him out of the hospital. Karly grabs my hand, her fingers wrapping around mine.

'She needs you, Melvin.' She whispers, her voice thick with emotion. I tried in vain to ignore Karly's thoughts - the memories of the abuse she faced at the hands of her first husband. She needs you here.

'I need to kill him.' I steel, unable to control myself enough to prevent the way I hiss the words at my mother.

Karly shakes her head, agreeing. 'There's time for that. They will call when they find something. But Lily is here now, and she was asking for you.'

My dead heart wrenches in my chest - the closest it had come to beating in over a century. I swallow thickly, my throat burning as I look and feel the thick scent of blood. I had not hunted.

The door swings open and Melchor walks in, bringing in the heavy perfume of Lily's blood. His expression was a mix of so many things I had never seen from him before - anger, exhaustion, grief.

'I didn't see.' Naddalin Natalie whispers to him, breaking the silence that followed his wake. 'Not until she was here. Melchor, what happened to her?'

'You know as well as I do.' He mutters, cringing.

I could hear jealousy in his thoughts. It was a surprisingly potent emotion against his normally calm, tamed ones.

All the doctors who had treated Lily upon her arriving were planning to go home, get absolutely wasted and forget about today's patient. Melchor, who had been at peace with his being for centuries, yearned to be human now. He yearned to join them and distance himself from the patient he was presented with today. He yearned to incapacitate himself and blur his memories, so remarkably similar and different to the way Lily's had been blurred.

I swallow thickly, turning away from him as if it would tune out his mental voice.

I very much wanted it too. I wanted to forget this, even for a few depressing hours. I wanted my memories of this to be forever altered in an alcohol-induced daze. A few shots of hard liquor on a mostly empty stomach would be satisfactory. But I would never be able to haze these moments and memories.

'Have the police been informed?' Karly asks. 'They'll want information about her. From you.' Karly covers her mouth, shaking her head. I cringe, wishing I did not have her fearful tenor of her thoughts invading my mind.

Melchor shakes his head. 'I persuaded them against it. To wait for Charlie to come.' He sits down on the couch, dropping his head into his hands. Karly moves to his side, sitting next to him. They did not do the

rape exam, yet. She was barely conscious when she came in. It would have been a clear violation of her body and mind.

Another one. I think furiously.

Melchor's thoughts were sharp in my head. I could see Lily in his memories. Her body on the gurney, twisting in pain. Her speech was disjointed and slurred. Her brown eyes open, clouded, and unfocused. The first indication was that she was intoxicated. Then Melchor smelled the drug in her blood, and he knew what had happened.

I could see how Lily reacted to him touching her. How, to treat her injuries, they stripped her of the clothes Chiaz must have thrown at her. She did not even notice.

I can see, in his memories, the hand-shaped marks developing on her skin. The shadow of bruises on her jaw and neck. The confusion, fear, and pain in her eyes. The hoarse way her words slipped out from the effort she had extended before.

I swear loudly, my hand slamming onto Melchor's solid wood desk. A piece of it splinters, dropping to the floor.

Melchor's eyes snap to mine, realizing at once what he had inadvertently shared. He quickly pushes his memories away, grimacing. Karly looks at me with pitiful eyes, but I pay no attention to her.

I needed to get out of here. I needed to hunt. I needed to kill him.

I take a shaky breath, trying to steady myself. I am trying to force the monster away, to resolve my anger. I needed to stay. I needed to take care of Lily.

'Melvin, she'll be okay.' Melchor tells me, his voice strong with conviction. 'Her injuries are not life threatening. The surgery was minor.'

Naddalin Natalie's visions flash through my mind. Lily dead in her kitchen. Lily dead in my arms. Lily dead at school.

I scoff, seeing red. 'Physically. Mentally is another field, you know that.'

I turn away from him, bringing my fists to my eyes as if that would block out the world. I forced myself to ignore Melchor - his thoughts spoken and unspoken. Naddalin Natalie's mind was just as loud as Melchor and in blocking him, I saw hers.

She was searching, again. But every vision was muddled and uncertain, constantly changing and shifting. But nothing was clear. Nothing made sense. No person was concrete, no scene was specific. The visions of Lily dead slipped in and out - sometimes present, sometimes

nothing but a difficult memory. It was making her anxious. She was sure about the future, not like this.

She had never missed a weighty decision, not since Lily jumped off the cliff. Naddalin Natalie had been watching her. Naddalin Natalie had not missed anything.

I needed to be away from her - away from her failure that inhibited Lily's safety.

'She's sedated now.' Melchor breaks the silence that was growing thick with tension. 'Charlie is with her now.'

He was resisting his thoughts, trying to block out his encounter with Lily when he had woken up in her room. I catch small glimpses of it, still. A painful ball forms in my stomach as I see signs of her remembering what had happened.

I take a deep breath, trying to control my rage. If only Jae was here. I stole the thought away. No - Jae had to be with Dejen and Vivian. They needed to hunt. Jae was the most skilled fighter amongst us. He needed to be there.

'I need to see her.' I insist.

'Charlie is with her, Melvin.' Karly responds gently. 'Give him a moment.'

I hiss, shaking my head. 'I left her for six hours, and now our reunion is here. Naddalin Natalie will talk to Charlie.'

'Actually, I will.' Melchor stands up, running a hand through his hair. 'I want to talk to him about bringing her home. She will not do well here.' And I do not want her to be forced into consenting to unnecessary exams and tests.

His thought was not for me, it was for himself. His grief, over watching Lily tormented in the ER with his hands was more than he could take.

Karly stands, too. 'I will see if I can talk with him. I am not sure he will be open to the idea of it at all. You should come too, Melvin?'

I look to Naddalin Natalie, wondering if she thought it would be wise. She simply shrugs, looking petulantly into the future in search of something.

I follow my parents from the office to Lily's room several floors above us.

Prepare yourself, Melvin. Melchor instructs as we walk. She will not wake for a few more hours. Either way, it will be difficult for you.

I do not respond. Difficult for me? I was enraged. I wanted to tear apart the man - the monster - that did this to her. Difficult was not the



word I would call it. It certainly was not a word I would use for both Lily and I at that moment.

Melchor shouts at me for a look, reminding me to stay calm. Charlie needs to be convinced of your innocence before anything else.

Lily's room was dark - a few monitors and a small lamp illuminating it. I was unsurprised to find Charlie sitting in a vinyl chair, his eyes rimmed red. His thoughts are buried in a report that was dropped off at his desk for the fourth time in the past two months.

Riley Biers, 19, read it. The college student had gone missing in Altoona weeks ago.

Charlie's thoughts were full of gratitude - gratitude it had not been his daughter, even now as she lay sedated in the bed. He was thankful he did not need to send out a search party - grateful that, even if she was hurt, he at least knew where she was. At least he was certain she was not dead.

'Charlie,' Karly starts, her voice gentle, motherly. 'We came as soon as we heard.'

He stands up, surprised by our presence. His eyes dart around, spying on me behind my parents, and his expression turns mutinous. 'Get. Out!' He roars, his hand twitching to the gun on his belt. His heart was pounding rapidly.

His thoughts were muddled, racing. He was trying to figure out whether to shoot me or handcuff me and slam my face into the tiled floor.

I freeze. In my haste to get here, to get to Lily and to ensure her safety, I had forgotten Naddalin Natalie's warning. In my own thoughts and rage, I barely heard Charlie's. Charlie stalks closer to me, his heart pounding furiously in his chest with stress. He was seething - nearly spitting at me in fury.

Charlie hated me for what I had put Lily through. Of course, he would try to put this on me.

If the situation were not so serious, I might have laughed. He had nothing on me. He would never be able to get to me. And if he did, his handcuffs and gun would hardly make this easier for him. He knew this, though. His thoughts as he glared at me, and my parents, were apprehensive. He knew he could not take us on, even if he did not know why.

I applauded him for wanting to defend her, for knowing he was outnumbered and ill-equipped and still taking a stand. Though, his desire to protect the sedated girl in the bed barely rivalled mine, despite the parental connection. My connection with her would always be stronger than his. His emotions paled in comparison to mine - heightened by my

being a vampire. If he truly knew my feelings for her, he might not be fantasizing about murdering me himself. I wanted to think his usefulness was nothing compared to mine, but Lily had been attacked under the protection of us both.

'I didn't do this, Chief Black.' I told him, trying to keep my voice level and calm. There was no need to be defensive - that would only spite him further. If anything, though, his thoughts became even more seditious at my words.

He bares his teeth. 'I don't believe you for a second, kid.'

'He didn't do this, Charlie.' Melchor repeats calmly. His voice was level, his eyes sincere. His mind simultaneously frustrated that we had forgotten to appease Charlie to my innocence while also trying to find a way to placate him now. Our minds were busy with other thoughts.

Charlie abandons the thought of attacking me or shooting me - both would land him in prison and grant me an easier sentence due to excessive force during arrest.

Charlie's thoughts were amusing as he imagined calling his deputies to demand a warrant for my arrest of me. He was torn - he wanted to do it himself, having imagined arresting me ever since I left Lily and McAuley months ago. But he wanted to stay by her side.

I related to him on that level. Both of us desperate to be the one to catch the offender, but unable to leave the girl we loved. My eyes float beyond Charlie, staring at the girl in the bed for the first time since I had entered the room.

'Oh, god.' My voice is a strangled whisper.

The room was small, and yet she looked miniscule in comparison. Her normally pale skin completely lacked color. Her complexion was on par with mine. A deep purple bruise was forming along her cheekbone, and several of them were already shadowing her jaw and neck just as I had seen in Melchor's memories. The previous exposure to her facial injuries did little to reduce the fury I felt.

My thoughts shot to Chiaz then. How had he done it? How had he dropped her off at the hospital and disappeared? How did he leave her in the hands of his sworn enemy and run away from the girl he loved?

My teeth clamped together at the thought. He did not love her. Not like I did. He lusted at her. Like so many others.

'Don't defend him!' Charlie seethes, his voice loud. I wince at the hatred in his voice. My eyes shot at Lily, worried that she would wake. Some assault victims grew fearful of loud noises, but Lily remained perfectly still. She was still sedated. Not even slightly disturbed by

Charlie's outburst. The scent of morphine was strong in the room and her veins.

'Charlie,' Melchor starts, looking slightly exasperated.

Melchor was always calm, collected, and patient. I had rarely seen him lose his temper in the decades I had known him. But now he was tired - his mood strangely parallel to how he felt upon finding Vivian in the street.

Melchor's unusual frustration, and Naddalin Natalie's rare uncertainty, were making me anxious.

'How can you be so calm? He hurt my daughter.' I knew it was a bad idea when they started going out. Charlie rambles, his face is red with anger. 'This is my daughter!' He is going to prison. Even longer if I can help it.

Charlie's hands ball into fists as he debates throwing a few punches, bruising me up the way he thought I had bruised Lily. I retreated a step back, knowing full well that if things turned physical, I would not be able to control myself. I had too much anger coursing through me. I would have to rely on Melchor to defuse this situation. Charlie would be in very real danger if he came after me now.

'Somehow, I am delusional to think that five foster kids would be anything but destruction in this town. And my delusions meant my daughter got harmed.'

Seething words fill my head - not ones spoken aloud. Charlie pauses his breathing rapidly, before opening his mouth to continue.

Karly beats him to it. 'Watch your words around me, Chief.' Karly's eyes flash angrily as she speaks. Charlie stutters into silence, shocked by her outburst. Karly could command a room, though few had seen it. 'Not one of my children has ever given you reason to distrust them.'

Charlie hesitates, unsure of Karly's anger and how to proceed.

'Melvin loves Lily more than you know.' Karly continues, furious. 'So do the rest of my kids.'

Melchor puts his hand on Karly's arm, trying to calm her, but she shakes him off.

'Don't you ever accuse my children of anything like that again.' Karly threatens.

'Charlie, most of our kids were camping this weekend, including Melvin.' Melchor explains quietly. I am not sure when he produced this story - or whether he knew Naddalin Natalie had receipts to back it up. With Melchor needing to be in surgery, we never

communicated the plan. 'They had been on the road since this morning - well before Lily was attacked.'

The ease with which Charlie's mind shifted to accommodate this added information indicated how weakly he believed that I was to blame. Shock courses through me as I realize just how little I understood Charlie's mind. His anger, his thoughts - they were a deep pool I barely tapped into.

Charlie was fuming, still, unable to determine who to blame. But his anger was dissipating, leaving him exhausted and miserable without anger to mask it.

'Who the hell did this?' He demands weakly, his eyes shifting between me and Melchor.

'I'm not sure either of us can answer that.' Melchor responds. 'I don't think she does, either.'

'Let me assure you, that in your search for her attacker, my children are innocent.' Karly points a firm finger in Charlie's direction, clearly still livid. Melchor touches Karly's back gently, reminding her that Charlie was not an enemy. He was a father, just as she was a mother.

Melchor sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. 'Karly,' he murmurs under his breath. 'He understands.'

'Good.' Karly snaps. If he even attempts. I swear I will stop him myself. I will stop any investigation myself.

'Did she say anything?'

Melchor shakes his head, grimacing. 'We had to sedate her early on. She was scared and disoriented - we were not able to treat her. Charlie, she was given Rohypnol.'

Charlie pales at the mention of the drug he had heard of so often. Sexual assault was a rare occurrence in McAuley. Most crime Charlie had dealt with was petty - break-ins or vandalism by high school delinquents and the occasional domestic dispute or speeding ticket. Even still, he understood the severity of Melchor's words.

This had been planned. She had been picked. The attacker - the rapist - had gone to her home.

'I'm sorry.' Charlie mumbles, collapsing into his chair. 'I shouldn't have thrown around that accusation.' Even if he did leave Lily comatose and cause her to run off to California with no more than a note.

'We all want to lay the blame on someone.' I respond quietly. Karly nods, obviously seeing the benefit in peace.

'Chiaz Naztherth brought her here, Charlie.' Melchor says.

'Did you know that?'



Charlie looks up, shock masking his thoughts. 'No.' Wonder why he did not tell me. He has not even called. He pales suddenly, stuttering. 'He did not. He - He did not do this?'

'No, no.' Melchor says, shaking his head. 'He thought it was Melvin.'

'Oh.' Charlie's relief is apparent in his expression.

'Charlie, can Karly and I talk with you in the hall?' Melchor asks, gesturing to the hall. 'It's important - about Lily's care.'

Charlie looks from Melchor to Karly, then to me. His eyes narrowed at me.

I just want some time alone with Lily. He huffs, finally nodding. He follows them out into the hall.

I felt relieved, grateful that Charlie was not pressed about my involvement in this. He had been easy to talk down, suggesting he really did not believe it was me.

My legs carry me to the bed, and I stiffly sit beside her legs.

'I'm so sorry, Lily.' I whisper, my fingers tracing the blurred edges of the bruise on her cheekbone. 'I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you.'

My mind swirls back to the woods. Naddalin Natalie, mid-hunt, freezing as her vision clouds her instincts. The gasp of horror

escaped her mouth, drew my attention to her thoughts. And then the ringing of her phone - incessantly. Dejen had yanked it from her pockets while she and I were trapped, watching the vision repeatedly.

Lily crying, pleading, thrashing against hands that held her back. And Melchor, his eyes darting from one injury to the next, realizing what had happened with a pure fury I had never seen him possess.

It was difficult to picture Lily - screaming and panicking - when I was looking at this one - silent, still, and asleep. I could not imagine the immense pain she was in, and the additional pain she inadvertently put herself through by moving and jostling her injuries.

I touch her hand, covered in a thick cast. I do not know what bones she had broken in her hand. But the thought infuriated me. He had broken her bones. He had bruised her face. He had done the unimaginable.

I take another deep breath, eager to quell my anger with her scent. But I am met with something entirely different. Her efflorescent aroma mixed with the scents of so many others. It was clear she had been given at least one blood transfusion during surgery. Chiaz Naztherth's scent was present, too, though not as potent. Melchor was right - Chiaz had not done this. Despite my dislike for him, I felt a surprising sense of gratitude that Lily still had her friend.

But beneath that and the strong antiseptics, I could smell the scent of her attacker. The scent made my body pulse with rage. The scent was potent. It clung to her. Whoever had done this had succeeded in what they wanted with her.

I took a deep breath - memorizing this new scent instead of refreshing my memory of Lily's. I would never forget it, and, if I had to, I would spend the rest of my miserable existence finding the owner of it. From experience, I knew I was a dreadful tracker. But this demon harmed my mate, and they were going to suffer.

My vision is clearer when I open my eyes. I look over, opening my mouth to ask Melchor a question but he is not there. The entire room is illuminated in sunlight dulled by heavy clouds when I was sure it had been dark when I closed my eyes.

'Bells,' Charlie's gruff voice grasps my attention. I automatically turned toward his voice, cringing as the movement sent spasms of pain down my neck. He was sitting in a vinyl chair, his expression a mask of grief.

My chest clenches tightly.

'How do you feel?' He asks.

I barely hear his words. I am looking at his face. His eyes are surrounded by deep bags, his hair tousled, his skin pale. He looked sickly.

Charlie laughs curtly. 'Don't take care of me, Bells. That is not your job.' He sighs, breathing shakily. 'That's my job. I am supposed to take care of you.'

My stomach feels as if someone punched me. Or someone pressed their knee into me. While holding me easily and ripping my clothes off.

I looked sharply, feeling my lungs collapse under the pressure in my chest.

'You, okay?' Charlie's voice is distant. 'Bells?'

'I'm fine.' I was not. My heart is flying. Each beat jolts grief through my body.

'You look sick.' Charlie's voice is muffled. 'Karly's in the hall.'

Karly. Melvin's beautiful, caramel-haired mother.

Karly was the sweetest, kindest person I had ever met. She was incredibly loving and nurturing to everyone. She was every bit of stability I wanted but never got from my immature, hair-brained mother.

But Karly's disappointment, though hard to receive, was entirely crushing. Dejen always laughed whenever he got scolded by Karly. He found it amusing at times when he and Jae got into trouble for their betting. But this was not as trivial as a bad bet made with my brother. This was my commitment to Melvin and my inability to protect myself.

Karly and Melvin were old-fashioned. Did the two of them value my purity the way others did during their time? I knew Melvin did. There was no other reason for him to demand marriage before something as personal and intimate as sex or changing me.

I had no time to tell Charlie whether I was accepting of Karly's visit before she quietly dances through the half-open door of my room.

'Lily,' her voice was so soft. 'I'm so happy you're awake, dear.' She walks over to me, her voice a mask of softness and motherly affection. She sits down next to me, her hand finding mine. Her diamond wedding ring twinkles in the dim-lit room. It was a beautiful ring with a sophisticated white diamond set between numerous other smaller ones. The band was twisted white gold resembling the infinity sign.

I once asked her about it. She smiled happily, then, telling me Melchor had asked her to marry him just one year after she had been changed. They had both been dancing around each other, she had told me, absolutely in love with the other but too afraid to admit it. Melchor was worried it would scare her, and Karly was self-conscious of the lasting crush she had on him.

I remember being slightly envious of her and her invincible marriage with Melchor, their incredible everlasting love. My parents were not like that. They had been divorced before I was even two. Melvin and I

had a strong, yet complicated, relationship that I often feared was on shattering glass.

I glance at Charlie. He is standing near the door, unsure.

'Are you anxious, dear?'

'I'm fine.' Those were the only words I could muster. Melvin always said I was a terrible liar, but that was just because he knew me so well. Melvin was inhumanely good at reading people. Karly was not.

A flash of a blond-haired person sends my eyes streaking toward the door. Melchor was here, too.

'How are you feeling, Lily?' Melchor asks.

Would Melvin touch me knowing someone else had?

Melchor had asked me something. My mind was hazy just trying to remember it. I do not think I ever answered him. He moves silently toward Karly, flashing to her side before I blinked. I glance around quickly, worried that Charlie will see. He was not here anymore.

Where did Charlie go?

Karly squeezes my hand, and I yank it back.

'Don't.' I hiss.

'How are you feeling, dear?' Karly's face falls slightly, but her voice is soft.

My head was throbbing. So was my chest. And as I thought about my pain, the more I became aware of it. My neck was sore and stiff propped against the low pillows. My ribs ached, and as I breathed in and out, my whole chest pulsed with pain. So much of my body ached with the movement of my shallow breaths. My stomach ached too, though I had no idea why. It just hurt. But what scared me the most was the deep, pulsing pain between my legs.

I did not want to think about that pain. I did not want to think about how much it hurt or what he did to me or what he said to me while he did it.

Karly did not know what happened to me there, that is why she had to ask.

She was here, which meant she was not banishing me from her family nor delivering the news of impending removal from Melvin's life. She was not disappointed or disgusted with me yet.

My eyes skip from Karly's to Melchor's and back again.

It is too quiet. I almost wish the beeping on the heart monitor was still here.

The diamond on Karly's hand flickers the light a bit as she squeezes Melchor's hand a little tighter. A time-less diamond ring.

I have been waiting an exceptionally long time for this.

I have been waiting for Melvin.

A small shiver rushes through my body. My slightly thawed bones froze up again. I have been waiting for Melvin, and Melvin's been waiting for me. But he got to me first. Would Melvin ever want me now?

Karly cannot know. She will never let me be with Melvin if she knows. Melvin cannot know either. But Melchor knew. He could not shield his thoughts, and he could not keep this from Karly.

Unless I lied.

Women did this all the time. They always lied about who hurt them or how they got hurt. How mysterious bruises and broken ribs occurred. I could lie too.

It was nothing. I slipped. I fell down the stairs. I was cleaning the tub. I tripped on the laundry and hit my head on the washing machine. I slipped while mopping the kitchen.

I try to rehearse the lines, trying to figure out which one makes the most sense.

I wish I had Naddalin Natalie to help me. Naddalin Natalie staged the story so perfectly Charlie had no choice but to believe I fell down the flights of stairs in Phoenix. I needed her now.



I force my eyes away from Melchor and Karly, wishing they would go away. Even if I fooled them, I would never fool Melvin. I would never fool Naddalin Natalie.

Should I wait for him to get here so I could get one more kiss, one more glance into his beautiful eyes before he went? Or would another 'clean break', as he had told me many months ago, be better? It did not work last time, so it would not this time either.

A kiss, I decided, would be better than nothing.

'Oh, sweetheart.' Karly breathes. She touches my hand tentatively with hers, almost seeking my permission. 'Please don't shut us out.'

My heart stutters slightly. 'I'm not.' I whisper stiffly.

I wanted one more kiss. Just one more. I could lie enough to get that one kiss, right?

My mind was so foggy. I vaguely remember screaming voices and Melchor's terrifying order to Chiaz to put me down.

Where had Chiaz found me? I shiver slightly as I remember that I was in my room was he found me and violated me. Did Chiaz find me there, or somewhere else? It did not matter if Chiaz could corroborate my story - by the time he showed up, Melvin would be gone.

I remember Melchor ordering a sedative.

I remember being in the ballet studio in Phoenix when Melchor was taking care of me. He was like this - gentle and comforting.

## 24 Sweetheart

'Sweetheart, you're safe.' Karly says, brushing some of my hair from my face. 'Would it make you more comfortable if I left? Is there someone else you would like to talk to?'

It did not matter who - Melvin could read everyone's mind. If he read their minds, he had never come to see me. Or he would see me like this. But then I would never get my proper goodbye.

I do not respond to Karly, and neither of them has said anything to me for a long time. I could feel my hands trembling as I thought of the probability of me seeing Melvin. It did not seem too high.

'Can you tell us what happened?' Karly asks, her voice so soft I strain to hear.

My thoughts flash back to what happened.

Sunlight streaming into my room. My Hamlet book is on my desk. His hands were on my body. His knee on my stomach. My head banged against the headboard. Black spots over my vision. A pin-prick pain in my side. Melvin's voice urged me to fight. Me giving up.

'I don't remember.'

The needle pickled in my skin.

My hands drift to my side, touching my stomach. No needle.

Not anymore. I was awake now.

Karly's hand touches mine. For the second time, I pulled my hand from hers, remembering how my hands were locked down before. Karly does not hold me or prevent me from pulling away. She was disgusted with me. She did not want me.

Thick tears were pooling in my eyes. It made me angry that my body would betray me like this. Anyone could tell that I was a liar if I started crying. My throat hurt so much that I withheld sobs, but it was no use. My tears slipped over my eyelashes and down my cheeks too fast for me to discretely wipe them away. I would never see Melvin or Naddalin Natalie again.

I missed them so much - both.

Had Melchor told me anyone else was here? My mind struggled to recall the information. Was it Dejen or Naddalin Natalie, or Dejen and Vivian? I tried to force my mind to remember his words but the more I tried, the fuzzier it got. I doubted Vivian would ever willingly stay at the hospital for me. She did not like me.

Why would Melchor tell me they were here? Why would they even be here?

Whoever it was, were they waiting with the getaway car? If I ran fast enough, I could make it down to see Naddalin Natalie, if she were here, before they drove away.

'Lily.' Karly sighs, wiping some stray tears from my cheeks. I turned my head away from her, resisting her touch. This was manipulative affection. She would get me to fall apart and then she would leave me. 'Please, please don't do this.'

Melchor's face remained blank, though Karly's was full of emotion. Fake emotion, but emotion. I sobbed quietly; my face turned away from Karly. I wish she did not see how much it was hurting me.

'What can we do to make this better?' Melchor says to me. He takes a deep, slow breath, closing his eyes. 'Do you feel more comfortable talking to someone else?'

He was giving me options now. If I could just get Melvin or Naddalin Natalie here and say my goodbye to them before the options were taken from me, that would be good.

'I want Melvin.' I sniff between my cries. My heavy breath was hurting my chest so much.

'Alright.' Karly says, her voice masked with relief and urgency. 'I'll go get him now.' She pats my hand, stands up and disappears

from the room. A sigh of relief escaped me when Karly disappeared. I did not want her to come back.

Melchor watches me with his golden eyes, studying me. I hated it. He reaches for my hand, and though every inch of me wants to pull away, I crave his comforting touch more. He is rubbing little circles on my hand, his dark eyes on my face.

I stared back at him.

I shake my head. I would tell him nothing. 'I want to see Melvin before you leave.' I tell him firmly. But, again, my voice was anything but firm. It was weak, pathetic. begging. He liked it when I begged. A shiver runs over my body.

Melchor stares at me, his eyes narrowing slightly. I could see his features change as he realized the meaning in my words. The muscles in his arms stiffened. 'Lily,' his voice was forced. 'We're not leaving you.'

'You are.' Tears were leaking over my cheeks again. I pull my arms close to my chest. It hurt to do it. My arms hurt and my chest hurt. My chest hurt so much.

'No, Lily, we aren't.' Melchor insists. 'Why do you think that?'

I could not control myself anymore. They won. They tore me apart and now they were going to leave me. What little control I had over my body dissipated as I broke down into hyperventilating sobs. I could not

breathe. My head pounded with every shallow, painful breath I managed to suck in. It felt as if I was not even exhaling, I was just gasping in the air between my fits. My chest hurts.

'I need to see him before you go.' I hiccup pathetically.

'Sweetheart, please, listen to me.' Melchor was talking to me now. The others were gone. They all knew what had happened to me. 'No one is leaving you. We are all here. We love you, Lily.'

I try to pull away from me, but it hurts so damn much. My chest hurts. I wanted to pound my fits into it. I hated my chest for hurting. But moving my arms hurt too, so I just let Melchor hold me. This would be the last time a vampire ever touched me. I would miss it. I liked how cold they were.

Melvin's at my side then, his face so close I flinched away. 'Lily,' he whispers, 'I'm here.'

'I'm sorry.' I close my eyes, feeling my world blur again as I turn away. My jaw hurt.

'How can you apologize?' Melvin breathes, his voice as hue of horror. 'This was not your fault.'

I did not fight enough. I let him do it. I should have fought harder. I welcomed the darkness when it was too quick. I should not have given up.

I feel the pinprick of pain in my stomach again. I pressed my palm against it, making sure no syringe was injecting me with more of the drug.

The blankets rustle as Melvin sits beside me. I flinch when his hand cups my cheek, my eyes still shut tightly.

'I am the one who needs to apologize - profusely. I swore I would protect you. I swore nothing would hard you again. And, yet again, I have broken my promise.'

His words - his voice - tears in my heart. Hot tears are rolling down my cheeks.

I opened my mouth to argue with him, to tell him it was not his fault. But my mind wheels back. It was not his fault, and yet it was - his and Melchor's and the whole coven's. They had done nothing, and yet this was about them.

This was about them. Not me. It was not about me, until it was.

I shudder, remembering just how much this was about me. How much it would remain about me. How much I would have to deal with.

His thumb runs over my cheekbone, and I am a little surprised by how relieving it felt. My face hurt - all of it. And so did my body, I realized. My whole body felt stiff, and it throbbed with pain.

'That feels good.' I whisper, my throat hoarse with pain. 'Your hand.'

'It's cold.' He murmurs.

I swallow thickly, blinking back tears as I open my eyes. His dark eyes were just inches from my face, wide with worry.

Melvin shifts, and I flinch back before I even realize what I am doing. I do not miss the flicker of pain in his eyes, or the way he makes it disappear in a second.

My heart throbs in my chest, twisting and wrenching with each beat.

'I won't hurt you.' He murmurs, his voice a soft whisper.

You never have. I want to say it, but a lump is lodged so deeply in my throat that I cannot make the words out.

He knew what happened. He knew what was done to me. I am nauseous - my stomach twists as the room spins.

I did not fight enough. I should have fought more. I should have listened to his voice in my head. I should have fought.



I stared down at my body - at my wrist in a cast and my hand wrapped in gauze that once held an IV. I should have fought harder. I should have listened to his voice. I should not have given up.

It is the thought that stutters through my head like a broken record until my world falls dark.

A quiet knock echoes at the door, and Melchor is stepping in when my eyes crack open against the bright light.

'Good morning, Lily.' He says softly, offering me a smile.

My only response is a coerced gulp to force the lump away. It does not work.

'Lily, I spoke to your father yesterday.' He continues, moving past my silence. 'He and I both feel you'd be better off recovering away from here.'

'Where?' I croak.

Do not take me home. I never want to go back there. I never want to go back to McAuley.

'Our home.' Melvin says. I cringe away, realizing that Melvin was sitting right next to me. That I was wrapped in his arms. My shoulders tense against his arms, and, as if he knew, he pulls away slowly.

Melchor is quiet a moment before he speaks. 'If you're comfortable with that.'

I felt and gave a breath I did not realize I was holding, relief and pain flooded through me simultaneously.

Home, but not mine. I was safe with the Shezor. I would be safe at their house. I would not be left alone. I would always be protected. They would stop him when I gave up fighting.

'I want to go now.' I whisper, suddenly feeling incredibly exposed in a public place where vampires would not have the same capacity to defend me.

I look from Melvin to Melchor, hoping they understand the need I have to leave. If not from my words, then from my eyes.

Melchor simply nods at me. 'Karly is just outside with some clothes. Melvin and I will take care of everything else.'

At Melchor's words, Melvin stands. His fingers brush against my good wrist as he leaves, tossing one last glance in my direction.

Karly enters before Melchor or Melvin leave. She is carrying two bags in her hands, setting them both down on the table at the foot of my bed.

'Sweetheart, do you want something eat?' she asks gently, laying her hand on my shoulder. The pressure feels peculiar - soothing, but intolerable. I do not want her hand there. 'I made some soup for your throat.'

'Maybe later.'

'I have some clothes for you. We can leave as soon as you are changed out of that gown.' Karly says, touching the material of the hospital gown. She reaches for the bag, pulling out sweatpants, a shirt, and a sweater.

'Do you mind if I help you?' she asks, and I shake my head instantly, ignoring the pain that spikes through my skull and down my spine. I did not even want to try getting dressed on my own.

Karly smiles at me.

She is incredibly gentle as she helps me sit up. I had not moved much, and now I understood why. Pain radiated through my body so sharply that I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out. It did not ease as I sat up straighter so Karly could help me change. She is fast - pulling my shirt over my head and guiding my arms into the sleeves as I cringe in pain.

As she pulls the blanket from my legs, I catch sight of my discolored skin. The sight twists my stomach painfully.

Beg me, Lily. Beg me not to do it.

Karly covers my legs with the blanket, her thumb wiping at my cheeks. 'Don't look too closely, sweetheart. It will only make it hurt more.'

'How long.' I ask, staring at the tan blanket over my legs.

'They're so dark.'

It takes a long time for Karly to answer. 'You were brought here eighteen hours ago.'

'Oh.'

It seemed like much longer and much shorter at the same time. Longer, since there was so much that had happened. Shorter, because it seemed impossible that my memories were from eighteen hours ago. It felt much closer - as if they were happening just seconds before they popped back into my mind.

I do not speak as Karly helps me into the pants she brought or as she helps me pull a thick sweatshirt over my arms.

I instantly hate the pressure - how restrictive it feels against my arms - and I shed it instantly. Karly watches but says nothing, simply folding the piece of cloth up and putting it back into the bag.

Karly stays with me, offering me food twice more, until Melchor comes. He is carrying a wad of paper in his hand. He stands at the table at the foot of my bed, arranging the papers in a folder.

I knew there were rules about being discharged. Wounds needed to be healed and cleared of infection. Nurses and doctors bustled about patients checking vitals, making sure they knew how to care for

themselves, asking for signatures on papers with medical and legal jargon. But now, it seemed as if no one cared. No doctor or nurses were requested. No one asked me if I knew what to do with my cast before a shower. No one checked my wounds or asked me how to care for them.

I knew, if they did, I would not have answers. I knew if they asked me to stand and walk across the room - as they had in Phoenix when I needed boots and crutches - that I would not be able to. My ribs hurt too much to sit upright, even with Karly's help. Not that I wanted to sit upright at all with my pelvic pain that made my stomach churn with nausea.

I was pumped full of pain medicine and antibiotics in Phoenix too. Nurses routinely checked my temperature - insisting it be below a certain threshold prior to my discharge. But here, Melchor did not seem to mind as Karly disconnected the machine wires from my skin.

Machines were shut off with each wire that was pulled, the stickers carefully eased off my skin.

'Charlie called.' Karly tells me, making conversation. 'He said he will visit today. He is happy that you will not be here anymore. He knows you do not like hospitals much.'

I do not respond.

'All done, Lily.' Karly says, and Melchor snaps the folder shut.

'Lily,' he says, his voice gentle. My heart pulled, unsure of what he was going to say. 'I know you are in a lot of pain right now, and it is only going to get worse as we are moving you. Can you allow me to give you some pain medicine?'

'No.' the word is out of my mouth before I realize I have even said anything. 'No, I am okay. I do not. I do not need anything.'

I shiver, thinking about the pain in my stomach again and the blurred colors.

Melchor sits on the vinyl chair next to my bed, his eyes pleading with me. 'I know that you are afraid. I understand. But I cannot allow you to be in this much pain.'

'I am fine. It does not hurt.' I insist, my eyes burning with tears. Anger burns through me - anger that I am crying again, that the tears are blurring my vision, that Melchor and Karly can see how weak I am.

Melchor is silent for a long time, and I stare at him, pleading.

'Lily, you were under the influence of a drug called Rohypnol.' Melchor tells me, his voice slow, hesitant.

I wince at his words, inhaling so sharply my chest radiates with pain. I turn my face away from him, as if that would shield my ears from his words. My vision blurs with memories of sluggish limbs and molasses thoughts. I cannot seem to focus - everything is weaving in and

out, hospital and then my bedroom, Melchor and then the other man, tears from Melchor's words and his.

'It is a drug used to incapacitate. It is cruel to use, and even crueler to be victim to.'

Everything hurts, and I cannot differentiate between my current pain and the pain of when the injuries were inflicted upon me. I cannot differentiate between Melchor's fingers on my hand and his fingers on me.

Watercolors. Melting images until they blur. Like everything is foggy.

'I won't do that to you.' Melchor tells me, his voice ringing with a sincerity that pulls me from my memories. 'Lily, I have never used medicines irresponsibly with you, and I will not ever do that in the future. I have never given you reason to distrust me.'

I glance at him through tear-filled eyes. He was watching me, his expression resolved.

'I need you to trust that I won't harm you.'

Melchor's fingers rub at my palm. His fingertips are smooth, cold, gentle. I stared at them for a long time, hot tears cascading down my face.

The drug. Watercolors. The blackness that overcame the pain and hopelessness before I woke up to a much worse fear. I do not want to go to sleep.

'I don't want to sleep.'

'I won't give you that much.' Melchor promises.

My throat hurts with a sob I am forcing down. I pull my fingers away from Melchor, wrapping them around my wrist. It hurts. My bone feels like it is shattering all over again.

'Just take me home.'

Karly moves to my side, taking both my hands in hers. She has tears in her eyes. Her voice fills the room, gentle and quiet. She talks about nothing in particular - words that float past my ears, quenching the silence but hardly filling the void in my chest.

She tells me of an Island with bright blue water. She tells me of the fish that assume colored masks she had never seen before. She tells me of white sand beaches that kiss the waves.

My hands tighten in hers when Melchor grasps my arm, his hand steadily immobilizing it.

'Deep breath, Lily.' Melchor murmurs, and then the needle bites into the skin of my arm.



I gasp, flinching closer to Karly. My body moves, even the arm that Melchor had been holding. A warm feeling was spreading through me - starting in my chest and expanding outward. As it moved, the cold relinquished its grasp on me, taking the pain away with it.

'Thank you for trusting me, Lily.' Melchor massages my arm for a moment before letting go. 'Melvin will carry you to the car. Until then, try to rest.'

My body seems to settle into the bed more comfortably now. My head lulls back against the pillows, too exhausted to be held up.

Karly keeps holding my hands, but her voice is more distant than before. I try to listen intently, try to grasp the words about colorful coral and tall palm trees. But they are all too fleeting. My body, once wrecked with pain, feels swollen with air and warmth. It is much harder to focus on anything else.

'You're exhausted, darling.' Karly finally tells me, brushing my hair through her fingers. 'Your body is ready to sleep now that there is no pain.'

I blink at her, noticing the energy it takes to open my eyes after the darkness falls over me.

'I don't want to sleep.' I whisper. The door opens and Melvin silently slips in.

'It's scary to sleep, I know.' Melvin whispers to me, his hands weaving into mine. 'But I'll stay with you if you change your mind.'

'Sam wants to meet tonight.' Dejen's voice is annoying. Jae, Vivian, and Dejen had begrudgingly returned home after an attempt at tracking an unknown that led them straight to La Push.

The house had been mostly silent until Dejen's arrival - Melchor in his study forging documents to replace Lily's at the hospital, Karly sitting in the den looking out the window waiting for her children to return home, and Naddalin Natalie huddled in a corner trying to foresee the future, the present, and the past simultaneously. The only exception to the silence was Lily who had whimpered and twisted relentlessly in her sleep until Melchor injected her with something to ease her anxiety and pain.

His thoughts were utterly tormented, conflicted over whether her previous consent to his medicinal involvement would extend still. Her pained moans hardened his decision. She had slept the entire way home due to his pain cocktail - her body absolutely exhausted from trauma and stress - and he wanted her sleep to continue undisturbed for a few hours more.

Part of me was desperate for her to wake up and allow her to see that she was safe. She was home with me now. The other part of me

was desperate for her to stay asleep and allow her body and mind to rest for as long as possible.

'When? Why?' Demands Karly. Karly had jumped up excitedly when they entered the house, feeling conflicted with dread and guilt at her excitement. She was hopeful that they had found something and was prepared to help them. Her excitement was apparently - ready to get revenge for her child that had been hurt. But her dread and guilt at murder and violence was slightly debilitating.

I heard these same sentiments echoed in Vivian's thoughts earlier that morning - excitement at the prospect of hunting and destroying another rapist and remorsefulness at the thought of another girl having to relearn how to live. In the end, much to her dismay, it was not the scent of Lily's attacker, and their hunt only led them to the boarder of the Reservation where the pack was waiting, prepared for a fight.

Now, Vivian, Jae, and Dejen had returned home.

'There's no point.' Jae says.

Dejen groans. I can hear him pulling himself away from the door dejectedly. He is ready for a fight. In his mind, and Jae's, we were already at war with the wolves. They were both fully prepared to fight the wolves to the death.

That is what they had intended to do with us tonight until Jae negotiated a temporary peace agreement. His intention was not peace - it was fairness. If the Mutts had their leader to lay the charges, we may as well have ours to refute them. We deserved to have equal footing against the mutts.

Melchor's thoughts are distressed. I do not want a war, not now. Too many lost lives. too much pain. 'There's always hope, Jae.'

'They believe Melvin did this, Melchor.' Vivian hisses. Her thoughts dart in my direction, filled with grief and pity. Emotions I had never seen in her thoughts before when they fell on me. I ignored her - I did not want pity right now.

'They're not looking for peace.' Jae agrees.

This is worse than I thought. Melchor was thinking.

I cannot see anything if they are involved. 'Melchor, we have to get away from this.' Naddalin Natalie's voice portrayed her uncertainty and frustration. Even Jae's effort did not dissuade her anxiety. 'If they get involved, I won't be able to see anything.'

'Melchor says we can't kill them.' Dejen grumbles.

'If we leave, they'll suspect Melvin even more.' Vivian says. I am stunned into silence, shocked by Vivian standing at my defense so openly.

'If we stay, I'll be blind.'

'You already are.' Vivian snaps bitterly. Did not see Lily's attack, cannot tell us anything about who attacked her or why, cannot see anything about these scents we keep finding around McAuley. utterly useless.

Arrogant! Jae's mind screams at Vivian. He is furious at the attack on his mate. My muscles coil, prepared to break up a fight if it comes to it. Dejen's thoughts - also preparing to put a block between Vivian and Jae - make me more relaxed.

He will deal with it.

Naddalin Natalie lets out an exclamation of distress but does not respond to Vivian's retort.

'We can't leave.' Karly says, interrupting the silent war between Vivian and Jae. 'Lily's father is here.'

'He's not in danger.' Naddalin Natalie protests. 'I need to be able to see. As much as I can.'

'When have we fled because the mutts told us to?' Dejen demands. 'There's a treaty for a reason. If they want us gone, let them be the ones to break it.'

'We can't leave.' Karly says again, adamantly. 'We can't take Lily away from here now.' Just think how that would disrupt her healing.

'Now is the time to leave, even if it means they suspect Melvin. Do you really think Lily wants to be here now?' Vivian says, her voice furious. 'There's no reason to stay.'

'Vivian, we're operating in the human world right now.' Melchor says quietly. 'Lily and her father are intertwined in this, and our decisions must take them into consideration. Charlie was open-minded enough to allow me to take her from the hospital, but we cannot leave the state.'

'If we leave, there is no chance of us finding who did this.' Dejen adds. His empathy for Lily - his sister - was strong.

'It's clear that we can't make that choice.' Melchor says firmly. No one speaks for a moment. The reality sinks in my mind now, and I could hear it in the minds of my siblings and parents.

We needed to stay in McAuley. For Charlie, for Lily, to hunt the monster. Consequences with the wolves be damned.

'There are too many possibilities.' Naddalin Natalie says, breaking the silence. 'I do not know how I missed this. I was watching Mazel, Caius, Demetri, and Jane - in case anyone decided to do something against Mazel 's decision - and Victoria.'

'Maybe it wasn't Mazel or Caius.' Dejen says. 'How many guards do they have? Any one of them could have decided to come here. Get in the good graces of their masters. Who knows?'

Vivian scoffs. Certainly not Naddalin Natalie.

'I've been watching Lily's future, too.' Naddalin Natalie mumbles. 'I should've seen.' She falls quiet.

Too many enemies. Jae's mental voice was worried. 'Mazel has been growing concerned with us for some time. Melvin's recent trip to Volterra did not help.'

I sigh quietly, filled with my own guilt as I stand. I needed to be downstairs, but I had promised she would not be alone. Karly, sensing my need to be downstairs, floats up to the room.

'I'll watch over her, Melvin.' She speaks. I would like to avoid the discussion downstairs. It is inevitable. but I do not want to be part of it.

I brush some of Lily's hair from her face, nestling it gently against the bruises on her neck. She was soundly asleep - a rare occurrence since her first night in the hospital. I needed to go downstairs.

'I'll be here.' Karly touches my arm, reassuring me. She will be safe.

I only nodded in acknowledge of her words, turning and leaving as quietly and quickly as Karly had entered.

Everyone's eyes flash to me as I step downstairs. Jae steps forward.

'This is exactly what Caius warned us of.' Vivian says, glancing at me. 'It has been two months. He decided to come check on her.' We are lucky to be alive. Technically we've all committed an unspeakable crime. I knew we would pay for it eventually. We should have killed her -

My hiss cuts Vivian's thoughts off, and she snarls back at me.

My eyes narrow at her. Was she not defending me only moments ago? Did she have no empathy for Lily still?

Naddalin Natalie lays a hand on my arm, reminding me in her thought that violence between us was mostly useless right now. You can get to her later.

'They would have killed her, Rose.' Dejen disagrees. Not raped her.

I wince, grateful he had not said the words aloud.

'Caius is not merciful that he would leave her alive.' Melchor agrees solemnly. Naddalin Natalie shudders in the corner.

'And I have been watching the Voltari or cult of fallen angels, Rose. Mazel, Caius, all of them. No one has decided about us.'



'That you've seen.' Vivian says. Each word is pronounced, each word a bullet that mentally shakes Naddalin Natalie.

'Perhaps it could have been spontaneous enough that it slipped your visions.' Jae mutters, simultaneously unhappy with Vivian questioning Naddalin Natalie's abilities and with the idea of others' decisions that impacted us slipping through.

'Maybe we're reading into it too much.' Dejen shrugs. 'Look, there's a dozen scents around McAuley right now. We know there is a situation developing in Altoona with a rogue newborn. The news reported two more dead today which brings the total up to six.'

'It was too a perfect coincidence.' Melchor says, shaking his head. He sits down on the couch, looking more human than I knew he could with his hands running through his hair and his face relapsed in stress. 'Naddalin Natalie and Melvin have not been hunting together in months. Naddalin Natalie did not see anything - '

'No!' I hiss at him, his thoughts ahead of his words.

'Melchor, you're not suggesting.' Naddalin Natalie narrows her eyes. A planned attack I would have seen. 'I would have seen a planned attack.'

'But you didn't.' I muttered to her.

Her eyes flash to mine. 'And it was not a coincidence. It is too perfect, like Melchor said.'

'What are you suggesting?' Vivian hisses, her eyes flashing between Melchor and Naddalin Natalie and me.

'They're playing with Naddalin Natalie's visions.' Melchor finishes slowly, his eyes on Naddalin Natalie.

Naddalin Natalie snarls at no one in particular, looking mutinous. 'That's not possible.'

'Isn't it?' I demanded, grasping her arm so she would look at me.' Mazel saw. In Volterra. He saw that you completely missed Lily being pulled out of the water. He knows your visions are imperfect.'

Her lips curl over her teeth. 'I've been watching him.'

'Yes, you have.' Melchor agrees. 'And yet your vision only came when I made the decision to call you. It was my decision, Naddalin Natalie, that showed you what happened.'

'So, you think Mazel is behind this?' Jae demands, his voice hard. I see his hand flicker to Naddalin Natalie slightly, wanting to protect her.

'If Mazel were behind this, they would have sent a vampire and Lily would be like us by now.' A growl builds in my chest as I consider my words. How close Lily was to death, to a damned existence.

What a freaking idiot. We should have stayed away. Or killed her after that accident. She does not belong in this mess.

No, not necessarily. He would have killed her.

They are too cunning for that. Caius is too cunning for that.

The thoughts bombard me from multiple members of my family, and I narrow my eyes at each one in turn.

'Mazel values her too much!' I hiss at them, remembering my time in Volterra and his fascination with Lily's ability to block our gifts. 'He wouldn't dare waste the potential she has.'

Jae stares at me. 'Perhaps. But Caius had his own ideas, you said so yourself.'

'He wouldn't leave her alive.' I snap.

'The guard would not defy Mazel, neither would Marcus of Caius.' Melchor says, holding his hand up to try and calm us.

Dejen's eyebrows pull together quizzically. He shakes his head. 'We are reading too much into this. What if it really was a coincidental attack?'

'What do you mean?' Melchor asks, rubbing the bridge of his nose. I should check on her. Her fever was a bit high last time.

'At least three vampire scents were in that house and one mutt.' Dejen explains. He eyes each of us. 'There's no way a vampire or mutt

would enter that house with those scents and.' He trails off, swallowing thickly. 'If I could have been a dumb human who took advantage of an empty house with a pretty girl.'

'That's absolute crap.' I could not stop the snarl that erupted from my chest. Dejen throws his hands up, surrendering.

'I am not trying to belittle this, man. I am just saying it would take a bold vampire to do this if they knew who her friends were. Not to mention, she would be in much worse condition if it were a vampire.' Dejen insists. 'And we know it wasn't - the scent wasn't like ours.'

'Exactly - it would take a bold creature to do this.' I continue. 'Human or not, her friends are dangerous, and everyone knows it.'

'Melvin, hear him out.' Melchor tells me, encouraging me to listen.

'He had a syringe of Rohypnol. That was planned.' Vivian says, her voice so soft I strain to hear it aside from the thoughts in her head.

I look to Vivian, appreciating that she is once again on my side. 'Chiaz got to the hospital less than two hours after I left. The window is too close. He came as soon as I left.'

'It would explain why Naddalin Natalie saw nothing.' Dejen says, but he steps back to show that his time arguing with me is over. 'If they decided it quickly, knowing that you would be back soon.'

'Naddalin Natalie's visions are her problem, Dejen.' Vivian growls, her eyes flashing. Dejen touches her arm, wishing he could say something to her without her getting more flustered and angrier. He knew she would be more comfortable and receptive in private, though.

'It has nothing to do with the attacker.' Vivian continues. 'This is all Naddalin Natalie.'

'That doesn't make sense.' Naddalin Natalie argues, her voice growing in volume and seething.

Melvin, you have never blamed me for not seeing something or missing something in the future. Even when Lily jumped off that cliff. Let us not start now. Naddalin Natalie says, her eyes pleading. I will figure this out.

I nod at her once, slowly so no one else sees.

'Naddalin Natalie can't see the wolves, Vivian.' Jae hisses. He was becoming tired of everyone blaming Naddalin Natalie. Naddalin Natalie's visions had never failed her before, except when it came to the wolves. But that was an issue with them more than her. Nothing about this situation made sense.

The attack was clearly not a spontaneous decision, but it was impossible that the decision had crept through when Naddalin Natalie was keeping such a close eye on our enemies and on Lily.

'How did you not hear anything while you were there?' Jae asks suddenly, his eyes wide as he turns on me.

'I heard nothing unusual.' I respond quietly. 'I wouldn't have left her if there was something concerning.'

Melchor sighs, shaking his head. He was utterly confused and devoid of answers.

'You should have heard something if the attacker arrived within an hour after you left her house. We were still close to the area.' Naddalin Natalie tells me, her expression blank.

'I heard nothing.' I repeat again. It was true. The only thoughts surrounding us had been Lily's neighbors, most of which were busy with their weekend chores and plans.

'The easy way to figure this out is to just ask her.' Jae says, his voice frustrated. She knows what happened. We cannot do anything without the information she can give us.

Vivian and I hiss at the same time.

'You have no right to ask her.' Vivian snarls. She takes a step forward, sinking into a slight crouch. Dejen's hand comes down on her shoulder.

'Calm down, Rose.' He murmurs.

'This is a matter of her future, Vivian.' Jae snaps back.

'And this is a matter of her current state. She is not well.' I respond, my voice just as angry. 'You don't know how she'll react.'

'I get it.' Jae moves deeply as he speaks. 'She's vulnerable. She is scared. She will have a panic attack if she thinks about it too much. But -'

'Well, I refuse to ask her.' Vivian growls. 'And I will not let anyone else do it either. She has the right to keep this to herself. It is bad enough we all know she was assaulted.'

'Naddalin Natalie's can't see a thing.' Jae continues as if Vivian had not interrupted him. 'We do not know who did this. We cannot do not even know enough to determine if there was a plan behind it.'

'Work with what you have.' Vivian snarls. 'He used Rohypnol which means he is weak. He is human. He cannot evade us for long. He is a dead man when we find him.'

'I'm with you, babe.' Dejen says quietly. 'But we don't know any of that for sure.'

Vivian hisses at him, her expression furious. 'If any of you dare try to ask her, you'll have to go through me.'

'Enough of this.' Melchor stands up, looking outside as the sun is setting. 'I'm sure the pack is waiting.' We do not need to give them more of a reason to be anxious.

Naddalin Natalie stands beside me - close enough that our arms can brush. It was her silent and secretive reminder of the bond we shared and every intentional touch on her part made me feel slightly better despite the horrid events of the last few days. She keeps her thoughts focused on the pack - not trying to communicate with me at all, for which I was thankful.

The boarder marking the Quileute reservation is silent and still, as if the tree rooted in the soil beneath our feet knows what is happening.

Six wolves stand before us. Tall - their heads high and their stance wide. Sam was in the center, his eyes glowing. To his right, Paul and Embry were waiting for their command. To his left, Seth, Leah, and Jared. Chiaz Naztherth was not here tonight.

He was a coward.



I glance at Melchor on my right. He looks at me, and then turns to face Sam and the rest of the wolves. He takes a step forward, making Jae take a step forward as well.

'Thank you for meeting us.' Melchor says after a moment, as if we had been the one to call this meeting.

Leah growls, her teeth bared, her mind wild with disgust.

I can see Dejen in the corner of my eye, his arms tense. He was only here to level the playing field. Dejen, Jae, and I were most equipped to take on the wolves. Melchor was blind with compassion, and Naddalin Natalie was blind in another, much more unusual, way. Vivian had opted out of the meeting in favor of staying to protect and watch over Lily with Karly.

This is not a meeting for pleasure. Sam's voice was displeased. Chiaz informed us of an attack on Lily.

I look toward Melchor, repeating the words tersely.

The lies of her attack. It was one of them, filthy, murderous bloodsuckers.

Chiaz's a wuss. Cannot believe he took her straight back to their arms again.

They killed her by now. Sam, we must act.

We know it was you, you monster.

This breaks the treaty. What are we waiting for? Let us do this!

Be quiet! Sam's voice finally overpowers the others', and each of them fall silent at his order. The power of the alpha command silenced them. I had heard Chiaz talking to Lily about it once. Sam could control the others while in wolf form.

You have the right to explain yourself, vampire. I am losing patience with your kindness.

I was impressed Sam had yet to lunge - perhaps, far beneath the thoughts I could read, he honestly believed I was not responsible for this.

'They're not convinced it wasn't me.' I spit between clenched teeth. Melchor frowns.

This is going to be difficult. Melchor looks toward me, and then back to Sam. I do not know what Chiaz told them.

Chiaz was not here in the clearing for me to scour through his thoughts. Where was he hiding? What was he hiding?

'My son is not responsible for this.' Melchor says his voice hard.

Show us proof.

'Chiaz has been to her room. You know, as well as the rest of us, there was another scent there.' I snap. Naddalin Natalie touches my arm, reminding me to be civil. Not even seconds later, I feel Jae's calming influence fall onto the entire clearing.

Sometimes I hated Jae. Sometimes I wanted to feel angry. Right now, I am more than grateful he was pacifying me. I breathe deeply, trying to remind myself that the mutts were not my enemy tonight. My wrath was awaiting someone else entirely.

'Melvin was not here when the attack occurred.' Melchor says, his voice full of conviction. 'You must see the reason, Sam. If we were as cruel as some believe, I would not have worked to help Lily live once her life was in my hands. She would not be at my home recovering under our care.'

Is she not in the hospital anymore? Sam's voice rang with horror. What goes on in your house, away from prying eyes, is uncertain.

I relay the words, my voice muted, and my body numb. The clearing has been quiet for a long time.

'Lily is family.' Naddalin Natalie finally says, her voice strong despite her strangled state of mind. 'We only want what is good for her and to protect her. She is safe with us right now. If you need to check on her to ensure her well-being, you are more than welcome.' Her voice held

a false sense of calm, and I knew that she was just as close to snapping as I was.

'Just know, mutt, that our patience wears thin, too.' Jae's voice is taunt, and even Melchor does not admonish him for the words. Instead, Melchor looks to me to add something, but I stay silent. I did not care what the wolves thought. Lily would be alive and safe if I were with her - wolves be damned.

Melchor was trying to placate them. Naddalin Natalie needed them out of the picture and out of her visions. Jae was trying to defend the family. I simply wanted to return to Lily.

Sam's thoughts are a frenzy for several long moments. They overpower the mental voices of their counterparts. He is shifting through the facts - cognizant of the scent Chiaz had shared through his memories. He knew that it was not a vampire. He knew it was not me.

If you say this is not you, then who did this? Sam's voice was hesitant. He did not want to admit he believed us.

'We don't know.' I respond flatly. 'None of us recognize the scent.'

What do you know? Paul demands coldly. Sam, despite wanting to berate him for interjecting when not asked, steps aside to allow Paul to speak.

I can feel my fists clenching. We knew nothing.

'They want to know what we know about her attacker.' I will tell my family. Jae's face goes hard immediately, his eyes narrowing.

Jae questions.

'Jae?' Melchor looks to his newest son. Jae grimaces, weighing the options. Telling them would not be detrimental, but it went against his instincts to share vital information with others who were not allied with him.

'We have the scent.' Jae says, his voice slightly cold. He and Dejen had gone to Lily's room and tracked the scent for as long as they could. They were not successful in their endeavor. 'We think it was a planned attack.'

Planned? The thought echoes multiple times throughout the pack, along with more confusion and some insults thrown our way. Some wolves were not entirely convinced of our innocence.

Sam does not silence his mutts this time.

What makes you think it was planned? Sam steps back into his spot, pushing Paul aside. His thoughts fly back to Chiaz - the memories Chiaz had shown of him running Lily to the hospital, how he fought with Melchor until he finally relented and allowed her to be taken through the doors of the ER.

'He wants to know why we say it's planned.'

'The timing - perfectly between Melvin leaving and Chiaz arriving.' Jae explains. 'And perfectly dodged each of our gifts so we didn't know what happened until it already occurred.'

'Whoever did this was careful not to kill her.' Melchor adds, his voice upset. 'Lily's injuries are severe, but not life-threatening.' Sam says, though he did not seem interested at all. While you may have convinced us of your innocence this time, I am sure you understand these events change nothing. Lily has made her choice and we will honor it. Our generosity will not become a habit - do not test our patience again.

My teeth snap together tightly at his thoughts. Lily had made her choice, and so had Chiaz Naztherth.

'I'd expect nothing else.' I hiss in response. Melchor looks at me, his eyes questioning.

Sam continues as if I had not spoken. The treaty still stands. You may not come onto our land or near our kind.

'I'm sure you can understand why we might not extend certain courtesies when trying to catch this monster.' I hiss at him. Naddalin Natalie puts her palm against mine, again reminding me to stay calm. We are here to placate them. To keep them out of things.

Crossing the border will be a violation of the treaty. Sam repeats. Any other human harmed will be a violation of the treaty. We are prepared to respond to such a threat.

'Noted.' I hiss.

We may have offered protection to some in your absence, but it is not our responsibility any longer. We take care of ourselves.

With Sam's final words, the wolves slowly retreat into the trees and disappear together.

'Well?' Melchor asked me after a moment, his eyebrow raised curiously.

'They want us to stay off their property.' I hiss. 'The treaty still stands.'

Dejen feels relieved. Good for them, freaking idiots. Finally got their brains back into their thick skulls. Of course, we did not do this to Lily.

'So, they'll stay out of it?' Naddalin Natalie breathes, relieved.

'As long as we stay off their land, they don't care what happens.' I snap, enraged. 'They do not care what we do with Lily - whether she lives or dies. They only take care of their own.'

Hypocrites. Protectors only when it is convenient for them.

Melchor nods, grimacing. He was not happy with this meeting. 'There's no shortage of protection for Lily now. We take care of our own, too.'

I growl, my fist connecting with a trunk of a large tree. The wood groans, cracking and toppling over three other trees as it falls. Furious with the wolves, for abandoning Lily. Furious with myself for allowing her to fall into the hands of danger to begin with. Furious with my brothers and sister for not being able to track down the monster today. Furious with Melchor that, despite his best work, Lily still had weeks of physical recovery ahead of her.

We did take care of ourselves, and I needed to take care of Lily. She is mine to take care of. Mine to avenge. Mine to protect.

'Where are you going?' Naddalin Natalie demands, her eyes wide, her hands outstretched as if they were about to catch me.

'Hunting.' Tracking. Destroying a monster.

'Melvin,' Melchor starts, his voice warning. 'She needs you at home right now.'

'I can't do anything for her right now.' I respond, my voice harsh as his mind infiltrates mine with images of Lily's injuries. I was not a doctor - I could not heal. I was a vampire - I could kill. 'Not while he is out there. Alive.'



'Yes, you can.' Melchor insists. There is so much you can do. She needs you home with her.

'When she asks for me, I'll be there.' I snap in response.

That is not fair to her. Naddalin Natalie tells her, though she was debating whether to join me in my hunt.

'Take care of her, Melchor.'

'Here you are, dear.' Karly places a small tray on my lap. Three layers of blankets shielded my legs from the heat of the dishes' contents. Somehow, despite its size, Karly had piled on enough food for three on the tray. My lack of appetite had not been apparent to Karly, or she was motivated by the little food I had eaten since waking up in the hospital.

'Thank you.' I mumble, trying not to show how much tomato soup and turkey sandwich made my stomach churn.

'Charlie, are you sure I can't bring you anything?' Karly asks, her voice full of motherly concern. It was strange seeing it expressed from Karly to my father.

'I ate.' Charlie, slightly awkward at Karly's doting. 'Thanks.'

Karly smiles in response, mumbling a remark about eating some dinner later. She leans down tucking my blanket around my feet as she exits the room.

'She's very attentive.' Charlie notes after a long pause.

'Yeah.'

'Mothers are just like that.' He says it more awkwardly than before. He clears his thought, coughing.

I enjoyed Charlie's visits, but today it seemed to drag. He usually stopped by before work to check on me and then again in the afternoon on his way to the reservation, calling at least twice during the day. Naddalin Natalie had informed me that he was not staying at the house in McAuley anymore. He had taken up a cot in Billy's living room instead. Despite Melchor and Karly's insisting, Charlie did not want to relocate to a guest bedroom upstairs.

'Are you going to eat?'

I spy the food, nausea spreading through me. 'I am not hungry right now. I ate breakfast late.'

That was a lie. Karly had served me breakfast late since I had woken up late after a particularly restless and nightmare filled night. But I had not eaten a single bite of it. The towering pancakes and bowls of fruit were not appetizing, and it was not for a lack of Karly's trying. I tried to cut up a pancake into tiny pieces to make it look like I had eaten a bit, but I doubt Naddalin Natalie was fooled as she carried my tray away.

Charlie grimaces, looking saddened by my response. 'You should try to eat a bit. Smells good.'

'I will.' I tell him, trying to make my voice sound confident and promising. 'Later.'

I stare at the tray, trying to figure out how to relocate it from my lap to the table beside me. But my wrist - fully encased in plaster - and my ribs - broken, bruised, and hurting - made the task look daunting.

Charlie must have seen my internal struggle, and he stands up and moves the tray for me without a single word.

'Mind if I check the score?' Charlie asks, and he is reaching for the remote before I respond.

The TV offers a welcome noisiness to the room that was otherwise mostly silent. Except for our stilted conversation - painfully twisting around recent events, injuries, and relocations from McAuley - and Karly's occasional entrance and exit, there was not much going on. The house was more silent than I was used to when I woke up this morning. I did not have an exact tally on who was home - but it was limited to only Karly - who was giving me space with my father now.

Charlie makes a disgruntled sound, and I glance up at the TV.

'Who is winning?'

'Oh, uh. Did not get there yet.' Charlie mumbles in response, his eyes fixed to the TV. I follow his gaze, looking at the screen where a pretty woman was discussing the news. 'It's about Altoona.'

'Oh?' I lean my head back against the arm rest of the couch, snuggling the blankets - which had warmed from the tray - closer to my chin. I was cold, and tired. I felt like the entire world was pressing down on my body, making it difficult to move and breathe and think past the pain.

'Did you hear about Altoona?' he asks darkly, shaking his head.

'No.' I had not put aside a lot of time to watch the news these days.

'A bunch of disappearances.' Charlie explains with a slight shake of his head. 'Stay clear of that area, okay?'

'Got it.' I mumble, closing my eyes. I do not have the ability to go to Altoona now. I could barely stand without assistance. And I did not need to be in Altoona to fall into danger. It came straight to my bedroom on a normal day.

A shudder rolls down my spine as memories thaw in my brain. I swallow a lump, forcing my eyes on the TV to find a distraction.

'A kid from McAuley went missing there a few months ago.'

Charlie sighs. He is quiet for a long moment, listening to the muttering of the TV. 'I am glad you are here, kid. I. I am sorry that I am no good at this. That I cannot take care of you like they can, but I am glad you are here.'

I force my eyes open, blinking away the blurriness of my exhaustion. 'You take care of me, Dad.'

Charlie does not respond immediately. 'I am just. I am sorry, Bells.'

I offer him a small smile, unable to find words to respond and positive that if I did open my mouth my voice would crack with emotion.

Charlie reaches for the remote, flipping the channels until he finds the game he wanted to watch. We watched in silence for a long time. Occasionally, I would close my eyes and wake up with the suspicion I had fallen into a light sleep for a few moments. But I was never sure until I opened my eyes to find Naddalin Natalie sitting casually at my feet, conversing with Charlie.

'My team is winning. Billy bet against me.'

'Good bucks for you.' Naddalin Natalie grins. 'It is apparent Altoona will win. You took a smart stance, Charlie.' She glances at me, winking. Of course, she would know who was going to win. Her visions

had not failed her before. Except for the one time it did when she did not see my attack.

Her hand is on my calf, silently offering me some comfort. I have missed spending time with Naddalin Natalie. I have rarely seen her since coming home from the hospital.

'You seem very sure of yourself.' Charlie spies on her, his eyes narrowed. 'You know Kickball that well?'

'Dejen and Jae talk about it all the time.' Naddalin Natalie rolls her eyes. 'I'm not much of a sport myself - I do have a killer pitching arm though.'

Charlie laughs heartily. 'I'll have to see that.'

Naddalin Natalie merely grins in response.

I let my eyes fall close again, hoping the darkness might quell the painful drumming at the back of my head. My whole body seemed to throb in tune with my heart. When I open my eyes again, Naddalin Natalie has disappeared, as has more of the light in the room. A few small lamps and the TV ghosted the room with dim light.

'Good evening, Charlie.' Melchor's voice is bright, much more cheerful than I am used to. I opened my eyes, noticing that most of the light had drained from the room.

'Hey Doc.' Charlie nods, grabbing for the remote to turn off the TV. Melchor waves him off.

'Just checking on Lily and then I need to head out again.'

Melchor explains easily. 'How did the Braves do?'

'They lost.' Charlie raises an eyebrow. 'You like ball?'

Melchor chuckles, sinking into the cushion next to my legs.

'It's the only sport I consider worth playing.'

'Hmm, that seems to be the attitude here.' Charlie responds easily. 'Beat Billy out of a few bucks. He does not know Kickball well.'

Charlie would have a field day with Dejen and Jae. Though, he would never make a cent unless Naddalin Natalie was on his side.

'That's unfortunate.' Melchor sighs, shaking his head. He turns to me, concern etched into his eyes. 'How are you feeling?'

I do not miss the way his voice drops, keeping my father out of his conversation.

I swallow with some difficulty, trying not to let my pain shine through. 'I'm fine.'

Melchor's eyes float from my face to the cold tray of food.

'Not hungry at all?'

I shake my head slowly, then wince as I immediately regret it.

My head hurt too much to be moving around right now.

'Can you try to eat some? Toast? As much as you can stomach.'

'I'm really not hungry.'

'I know, but you're in pain and I don't want you to be.' Melchor reaches for one of the sandwiches, breaking off a small section of the bread. 'Eat this. It should help.'

I gaze at the bread he was offering, reluctantly taking it. It was not much - three or four bites at most. But it seemed like an overly daunting task for my nauseated stomach and aching head.

Melchor waits a moment, watching me with sympathy as I force myself to swallow a single bite. It made my stomach churn in the worst way.

'I'll be back.' He tells me. As he leaves, he offers a sigh at the TV when a batter strikes out. It was for a show. It was for Charlie.

I swallow another bite, trying desperately not to gag in disgust as I chewed. There was nothing wrong with the bread. There was something wrong with me.

Melchor returns only a moment later, watching me for a moment with an expression of sympathy before silently permitting me to put the rest of the bread down.

Melchor was more gracious about my eating than Melvin.



My eyes slip around the room, looking for Melvin. I had not seen him since I woke up this morning and he helped me to the couch. He had touched my face gently, whispering something too soft for my ears to catch and I had not seen him since.

'Where is everyone?' I asked Melchor.

He offers me a small smile. 'They've gone out. I am sure they will be back soon.'

'And Melvin?'

Melchor's eyes hardened. 'Hunting.' His answer is short and curt, though I am not sure why.

'Good.' I sigh, slightly relieved. He had not hunted recently. His eyes had been dark every time I had stared into them since waking up in the hospital. If anything, my relief angers Melchor more. This behavior confuses me.

'Why didn't you go?' I ask, spying on his dark eyes.

He offers me a small smile, though it seemed forced. 'I was at the hospital.'

'I thought you took time off.'

'I was handing in my resignation.'

My stomach flips uneasily. 'What?' I whisper. 'Why?'

'My family needs me right now.' Melchor answers, his voice quiet but full of pride and conviction. 'My family is my priority.'

I do not respond - I do not know how to. Again, my throat fills with the pain of holding back tears. Tears of my love and gratitude for Melchor and for the rest of his family. Tears of anger that this happened to me. Tears of betrayal that they did not save me.

Melchor sits with me for a moment, looking between me and Charlie to occasionally make a remark about the players on the screen before he excuses himself from the room.

'You are settling well here?' Charlie asks me, his voice uncomfortable.

I nod.

'Do you need anything? Anything from your room?'

'No.' I hiss, a little too harshly. Charlie recoils slightly at my tone. 'I am fine. Thanks.' I add hastily, trying to soften my tone.

He nods in response, grimacing. 'Is this better for you, Lily? Being here and not at the hospital?'

I pull my eyes away from Charlie, focusing on the blankets covering me. My fingers find the stitches of the hem, picking at them. I did not want to converse with Charlie about this.

Everything was better than the hospital. Anything except being in McAuley.

I involuntarily wince, remembering the day I had come home from the hospital.

Bright, clear sunlight filtered against my eyes, making me cringe. My eyes were painfully sensitive. Cool sheets rested over my bed, and I snuggled deeper into the pillows.

Except, instead of the usual warmth and comfort I reveled in, my mind filled with shocking fear and pain. Hands pressed over me, knees digging into my stomach, hot breath on my neck, pain in my skull.

My body screams as I hurl upwards, pushing ghost hands and knees off my body. I sob, shoving the sheets off. My hands shake, my cast weighing down my arm, my body throbbing and slowing my movements. My limbs tangle in the sheets, and fear pulses through me.

I am fumbling, struggling off the mattress as fast as I can as walls close in around me and pressure leans itself on my lungs. I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe. I am not safe. He is here. I cannot breathe. God, it hurts. It hurts so much. I cannot breathe. It hurts.

The edges of my vision were dark.

'Lily, it's okay.' Melvin's voice was near me, and I reached for him, my hands clawed. Where was he? I could not find him. My hands grasp and claw at the air, finding nothing.

Where was he? Why hadn't he been there? Why hadn't he protected me?

I am not safe. Not now. I cannot breathe. Why can't I breathe?

'It's just me.'

I feel the steel-cold touch of Melvin's hand on mine, pulling me against him. 'Lily, you are safe. You are home.'

'No.' My voice is so loud I flinch. 'Get me out. Get me out.'

'Lily,'

'I can't breathe.'

'You're in my room.'

Memories were running through my head - a thousand times I had seen them, in every angle, in every combination. They flew across my vision so I could scarcely figure out whether I was in my room or Melvin's. I did not want to be on the bed.

'Get off.' I scream, unsure of where the man was. Unsure of if he would be trying to get to me again. 'No, no. I need - I - go.' I gasp, my hands coming to my neck. I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe. I need to leave. I do not want to be here. I cannot breathe. 'I- get me out.'

'Shh. You are in my bedroom, Lily. You are in my home.'

Melvin soothes, his hands brushing against my back. His touch with light, but it sent jolts of pain through my body. His voice sounds so distant, so foggy. Like he is in a trance. 'Just breathe.'

My hands find his shirt easily now, I grasp it with all my strength.

How do I breathe? I do not know how to.

My heart was being squeezed by the same pressure that was on my lungs. The air was thinning.

I hear hums of noise. I cannot seem to hear anything but the sound of my lungs dragging air through my lips.

My vision is black, and I claw at my face, trying to get my eyes to open. I do not want to be sucked in again. I do not want to go to sleep. I want to fight this time. My eyes are open. I cannot see beyond the black and red splotches of color.

'You're going to be fine. Just breathe. In and out.'

There's too little air for me to breathe. Too little. It is too thin. I cannot breathe it. I need to go. I am not safe.

'Good, Lily. Keep breathing.' Melvin hums. His hand is cold and hard as ice, and it makes me shiver. 'Don't hold your breath. You are doing so good.'

'I'm sorry.'

'You have no reason to apologize.' Melvin murmurs. I clench and unclench my fists in his shirt, realizing the movement helps me focus less on the thinning air. I am hot - feeling furiously feverish and sweaty - but shivering so hard I am sure my teeth are chattering.

'Take me out of here.' My voice shakes and my throat hurts with sobs trying to escape.

'You're not in McAuley, Lily.' Melvin whispers. His fingers wipe my cheeks. 'You're at my house. You are in my room. You are safe here.'

'I don't want to go back.'

'You don't have to.'

I do not have to. I do not have to go back to McAuley. Back to that house. The laundry is still in the dryer. My room is a mess still. I never cleaned it. My book is on my undusted desk, along with a dozen assignments for school, exactly where he put it. My unmade bed - a testament to a violent crime.

'I can't breathe.' I gasped.

'You're having a panic attack.' It is Melchor's voice now. His fingers pressed to my wrist, and I pushed them away. 'There's plenty of air

to breathe. Focus on one breath at a time - in and out. You can do this, Lily.'

'Melchor, please.' Every breath sent searing pain down my side and stomach. How could I breathe when everything hurt so much? When each pain from my injuries reminded me of how I got them?

'Tell me what you need.' Melchor says, his voice gently probing at me.

'Everything hurts.'

'Do you trust me, Lily?' Melchor asks me, his voice soft. Melchor grips my hand in his, not hard enough to cause me pain but I was sure my bones might shatter of their own accord. 'Can I give you medicine? Do you trust me to take care of you?'

I shake my head, tears blurring my vision so that Melchor was a fuzzy figure with striking blonde hair and pale skin.

'Close your eyes, Lily.' Melchor tells me. Closing my eyes does not protect me from the bite of the needle, but the warmth that spread through my body and eased my anguish made it worth it.

I give in, again. Because it is easier than fighting. It is easier than suffocating to death. It is easier than enduring the pain while he holds me down and violates my body.

I let the darkness wash over me and consume all my agony as it does.

I had led Melchor to sedate me. I let him give me medicine. And I woke up feeling worse than before. Melchor promised it was the lingering effects of the medication, but it felt too much like waking up in the hospital again. I never wanted to have medicine in my body again.

'Bells,' Charlie's voice interrupts me from my thoughts. 'Have you given it any more thought?'

'What?'

He swallows thickly, looking uncomfortable. 'The police should have evidence, Bells. We cannot convict anyone without evidence.'

My heart stutters in my chest. Why was he mentioning this again? Tears well in my eyes, remembering the last time he had talked to me about this.

'Lily, who did this?'

'I don't know.'

'Not Jake or Melvin?'

'I don't know who it was.'

'You don't know because you never saw them or because you don't know them?'

My chest hurts.



'Lily?'

'I don't remember.'

'Crap.' Charlie's voice is so loud I cringe.

'You should do a police report, Lily.' Charlie's voice was not firm, it was not a question.

I cringe as he rummages around, reaching for the drawers of the table beside the bed. 'It's just a few tests, Lily.'

'I'll think about it.'

I thought about it, but I knew I would never change my mind.

'I don't want to.'

'Lily.' Charlie's voice conveys his frustration and anger. 'I am not asking you if you want pizza for dinner. This could happen to someone else if we do not get him.'

'It won't, Dad.'

'How can you be so sure? Lily. What do you know?'

'Nothing. I am tired.'

'Lily,'

'Dad, I said no.' I tell him, my voice a whisper. It would not happen to anyone else because no one else associated themselves with the Shezor the way I did. I could not submit myself to more invasive tests.

'I know, I know.' He says quickly. 'Why won't you do it?'

I am quiet for a long time, my fingers picking at the stitching of the blankets on top of me.

'This is the one thing I can do for you.' Charlie's looking at me, his eyes begging. 'I know this is a small town and the department is small, but we have resources. I will talk to the police up in Altoona. We will find him.'

'Whoever it is, the report will not do anything.' I whisper. Begging was better than forcing, but I would have preferred to have neither. 'Some things are just beyond the law.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Charlie snaps, his mouth set tightly in a line.

'Nothing. Just leave it, please.' I wrap my arms around my body, wishing Melvin were home to save me from the rest of this conversation. He would easily have been able to walk in, change the subject and tell Charlie what he needed to hear.

He was out hunting. He needed to hunt. Despite the positive behavior, my stomach tightens. The last time he went hunting I ended up in the hospital. Only this time, I was in a house of vampires to protect me. But the vampires had a death threat they did not know about hanging over their heads.

Charlie huffs, leaning back in his seat. 'Allison called.' He finally mutters, meaning I would be at least partially forgiven for my refusal to do a report.

'And?' I asked, my breath strangled in my throat.

'I told her you're fine.'

'Thank you.'

'I can't keep lying to her.'

'I'll take care of it.' Correction, Naddalin Natalie would take care of it. 'Thanks, Dad.'

'I should head out.' Charlie stands. He looks uncomfortable and flustered. 'I'll come by tomorrow, okay?'

I nod in response. He looks like he wants to say something more, but he just offers me a stilted smile and disappears from the room.

I stare at the TV screen for a long time, ignoring the way the flashing and flickering lights burn my eyes and make my brain throb. My stomach churns. I was not sure if it was from my conversation with Charlie or the TV.

My wrist hurts. Pressure picking at the sides, displacing my skin, and crushing my bones. A hiss of pain escapes my lips as I bring my cast hand to my chest, protecting it from nothing.

'Lily? Are you all, right?' Karly's soft voice is next to me.

When I open my eyes, she is standing in front of me, her expression one of concern.

'I want to take a shower.' I told her. I had not yet. I did not know how long I had been home from the hospital, only that I was always too tired to do anything but sleep and force a few bites of food into my stomach. Maybe if I did Charlie might stop asking me to let people collect evidence of his assault on my body.

Karly nods easily, a smile of sympathy on her lips. 'Of course.' She hesitates then. 'Lily, I am not sure you would be able to shower yourself. Can I help?'

My shoulders rise in carelessness of their own accord. Karly had helped me change once at the hospital, what difference did it make now?

Karly offers me a smile, lifting the blankets away from my body. I shiver as the chilly air attacks. Her arms slide beneath me, lifting me effortlessly despite her petite figure.

The movement of being carried from the living room made my stomach roll with nausea. I was more than grateful when Karly stopped in the bathroom next to Melvin's room, sitting me down easily on the side of the large tub.

I lean against the tiled wall, my body aching with exhaustion.

'Ready, darling?' Karly asks me. There was a chair in the shower already, a soft cloth covering the plastic seat. Karly mentions something about how difficult it might be for me to sit. I was too tired to respond.

Karly slips a piece of plastic around my cast, tying it tightly on my arm. She helps me out of my clothes, tossing them into an empty hamper in the corner.

I shake my head slowly. 'I'm so tired, Karly.' I murmur.

'I know, sweetheart. I will help.' She brushes her fingers through my tangled hair. Karly supports my weight as I stand, helping me settle onto the chair. The soft cloth beneath me helped ease the pressure of sitting on my pelvis, but it still hurt.

My eyes drop down to my body unconsciously and suddenly I wished I had not. My thighs were covered in layers of dark purple bruises in the shape of handprints. Long, tender strips where his fingers had grasped my thighs. Fingers pressed into my skin, etched so clearly it felt like they were still wrapped around my legs.

I shriek, pushing the invisible hands away. 'Stop it.'

'Lily?' Karly turns, her voice full of concern.

I look up, away from my legs at Karly. But it is not Karly I can look at. It is something much worse behind her.

A breath of air escapes me, as if I had been punched. Worse, as if someone were on top of me, forcing air out of my lungs with pressure that broke ribs.

A small girl sat behind Karly. Her skin was white as sheet paper and disfigured with swelling. The pale undertones scarily contrasted by the deep bruises that trailed from her cheeks down her jaw and neck. The bruises did not stop. The more I stared, the more I saw. Black and purple splotches down her side - over her ribcage, down her stomach, slipping towards her hips and back. Prints shaped like fingers, palms, knees. Teeth.

I could feel his hands gripping my skin, his nails digging in as they pushed my legs apart. His hands as they gripped my jaw, holding my screams within me. His knees pummeled into my stomach, holding me down.

'Shh, it's okay, darling, breathe.' Karly's voice was close to my ear, brushing my hair from my face with her hands. It took me a second to realize that I was hyperventilating. The breaths I dragged in were released before they did any good for me. The terror in the girls' eyes reflected my

own. It ravaged my head, swirling through my face and settling deep in my stomach.

The body of a girl who did not fight. The body of a girl who let him dirty her.

'In and out, there you go.'

I follow her instructions, letting her guide me through some deep breaths to keep my mind off the memories.

'It hurts.' I cry, gripping Karly's arm. The painful memories and the bruises on my skin. They both hurt. But I did not know which one hurt more. Which one got priority. Do I stop moving to stop the aching from my bruises or do I stop breathing to numb my brain?

'I know, dear.' Her eyes were full of moisture, though she could not cry. She lets me hang on to her for a few more minutes before she gently pulls her arm away, talking to me the entire time. She moves away from me, using a large towel to cover up the mirror. My reflection disappears. But I stared at the towel, knowing what lay behind it. Knowing that even if I could not see the mural of blue, black, and purple, everyone else still could.

A testament to my failure. To my weakness.

'I'm going to wash your hair, dear.' Karly tells me. She guides my head back, so I am staring at the white, tiled ceiling. Scalding tears roll down my face, but I bite my lip to keep from sobbing.

They were tears of failure, of disgrace, of disgust. I gave up. I let the darkness take over. I stopped fighting. Just like how I stopped fighting with Melchor's sedative. I am weak. I yearn for darkness rather than fighting.

The water is warm as Karly directs it over my scalp. Her fingers are so tender and gentle.

She talks to me in her sweet, comforting voice the entire time about nothing. She talks to me about an island Melchor bought her decades ago and how she has never seen bluer water. She will take me there one day, she promises. She talks to me about Melvin's house in Texas - he took her to visit it once when she was a newborn. She tells me about the pictures of his parents he had packed away. He still owned the house and went back every so often to check up on it. She tells me how Melchor spent years researching his life in the mid-1900s to pinpoint his exact birth year and find his mother who died during his birth. He found his father's grave somewhere in Europe, but nothing more. Records were just not kept then the way they are now. She talks to me about Naddalin Natalie's obsession with clothing and how it had driven the family crazy at



first. But, eventually, even Dejen learned to live with Naddalin Natalie, wanting to shop for him.

She finishes washing my hair and slowly and carefully begins washing the rest of my body. She lets me use a washcloth to put soap on my torso, but my legs and arms are much harder with my broken ribs, so she takes over. She keeps her distance from my thighs at first, but with tears in my eyes, I plead with her to wash his filth away. With a sorrow-filled expression, she complies and gently runs the washcloth over my thighs. I begged her to do it repeatedly and she complied, washing my skin until I had no energy left to beg her for more.

She is incredibly careful to avoid the left side of my stomach. I have no idea why and I am too scared to look. When her back is turned to me as she is retrieving more soap, I let my fingers glide over the area. It is covered in gauze and shockingly dry, though I was sure she had at least let water wash over me. It is incredibly painful, and I gasp, drawing Karly's attention. I feel ashamed as her eyes catch my fingers on my stomach, but she sighs quietly and sits on the edge of the tub tenderly.

'You had surgery, sweetheart.' She moves my hand from my stomach, taking it in both of hers. 'You'll be tender there.'

'Why?' I whisper. My voice was hoarse. It was always hoarse.

She hesitates, her eyes conflicted. 'You had some internal bleeding.'

'What was bleeding?' Was it stopped? Did they have to take something out? I never took human anatomy in high school - I knew my prospects of working in the medical field were low considering my ability to handle blood. I had no idea what was in the left part of my abdomen. Was it a kidney? Appendixes always had issues, did my burst? Or my liver? Could I survive without my liver?

'Your spleen.' Karly answers easily. She removes the spray of water on my shoulders, rinsing the soap off. I was shocked by the slight stinging of my skin as the water ran over my body, but, like before, I was too afraid to know what happened.

I let Karly finish washing me, almost wishing I could just fall asleep in the chair. I was so tired.

Karly's done quickly and she offers me a large towel to wrap myself in. It is almost useless, because even though I try my hardest to drape it over my shoulders, my ribs protest painfully, and my encased hand makes it impossible for me. Karly, understanding my pain and struggle, takes the towel from my hands and drops it onto my shoulders. She is gentle as she uses another cloth to wipe my legs dry.

I am surprised when she holds up a large shirt and not a hospital gown. She understood how uncomfortable the pants and sweatshirt were.

Karly does all the work dressing me in a shirt. It falls over my body, thankfully covering my thighs. I hope Melvin never saw my thighs. I know Melchor did. Melchor blocked his thoughts from Melvin. I did not want Melvin to know - to see - what happened. I did not want him to know how badly I was hurt.

Karly pulls my hair out from the neckline, wrapping it all in a towel to dry. Then, without a single word uttered between us, she helps me up into her arms, breezing me into the other room.

Melvin's room - previously transformed with a massive bed with gold covers and a 4-poster metal frame - had been returned to its original state. The couch had been moved back to its original spot where the bed once had been situated. The only difference was that it was piled high with blankets and pillows for me to sleep on.

My heart clenches as I realize the room is empty. Melvin is not here. He was not downstairs, and he was not upstairs. He is still out - hunting. Quenching his thirst. Feeding the part of him that was not human.

I wanted him here now, with me.

Karly helps settle me onto the couch and props me up with multiple pillows. Just as quietly as before, she pulls my hair to the side and begins running a comb through it until all the knots have disappeared. It felt so nice having her take care of me that I found myself leaning into her embrace and quietly protesting her lack of combing until she started again.

'What do you need, Lily?' Karly asks me, her voice soft.

What did I need? I needed it so much, but I did not know what it really was. I needed my body to not hurt so much, my mind to not feel so strangled by what happened. I needed Melvin. I did not know where he was. I had not seen him all day.

My vision flashes to the bruises. On my thighs. On my face. On my neck.

'What happened?' My face burns red as I asked her, my eyes dropping to the floor.

Karly's fingers pause in my hair before they begin pulling again, tugging each strand apart and then braiding them back together soothingly. 'What do you mean?'

My stomach rolls uneasily, as it had been since I had first woken up in the hospital. This time it was different though.

He hurt me. He bruises me. Melchor had to cut me open and fix me. He had to reset my broken bones and stitch me and fix my lungs.

Melchor had seen everything He had seen every battered, broken, bruised inch of me. And what he had seen, so had Melvin. What the nurses and doctors who worked over me saw, so had Melvin. Melvin had seen more than just the visible bruises on my neck. He had seen my thighs with handprints inked onto them, too.

He made my spleen bleed. He made my chest hurt when I breathed. He ripped me so badly it hurt to sit.

24 Smarty

-And-

Melvin knew it all.

A small bowl appears in my face just seconds before my stomach forcefully expels whatever was in it, which was nothing. My body heaves, but nothing escapes me. My ribs scream as I crouch over, and my back spasms with each convulsion of my torso. Hot tears roll down my cheeks, setting my bruises aflame as if they were made of molten lava.

Someone's hands are in my hair, trying to comfort me. I wanted them off. But my body was so consumed by my heaving that I was unable push the hands away.

Someone's hands are on my back, touching my ribs. I wanted to scream. I could barely breathe between the forced chokes and coughs, much less utter a sound or plea.

Karly had seen too much. She had seen my entire body. She had washed the bruises and pains away. She knew how weak I was. How pathetically incapable I was of fighting back.

What Karly witnessed, so had Melvin.

My stomach churns over and over until my body is too exhausted to do anything. The bowl disappears and I am left with the cool hands that are holding back my hair. Karly wipes my face with a damp napkin, cooking soft words I cannot hear.

My temples are pounding, perfectly aligned with the sobs making my entire body tremble.

Everything hurts so much that I can do nothing but cry.

I close my eyes, cringing away as Melchor comes close.

'Drink some water, Lily.' He speaks.

I want to reject it, but no words can escape me between my screams.

He put a straw to my lips. My jaw aches as I sip, and the water burns as it crawls down my throat.

'I'm sorry.' I croak as Melchor uses another clean napkin to wipe the tears from my cheeks.

'Don't be.' He murmurs, discarding the napkin. 'Let me feel your ribs.' He presses his hands gently to my side, but even his soft touch makes me cry out in pain. His fingers run along the sore parts of my side and my vision seems to sparkle with black dots. 'We need to be careful. I do not want you to displace these fractures.'

'Melchor.' Karly's voice was frustrated.

'Try to breathe deeply, Lily.' Melchor tells me, finally removing his hand. The reduced pressure did little to ease the pain. 'You jostled your ribs too much just now.'

'I can't remember it.' I say to him, sobbing. 'I. don't.'

I could remember. But not enough. I remember the black, the watercolors, the feel of his hands. I needed to remember it all, but I wanted none of the memories in my brain. I needed to know how he had hurt me.

Melchor's thumb runs over my cheek, collecting more tears as they fall. 'Perhaps that's for the better, Lily.' He murmurs. 'Memories can be a prison.'

'What else did he do to me?' I moan.

'We don't have to talk about that right now.' Melchor suggests.

'Let me -'

'No, no.' I cut him off, shaking my head. It made me dizzy, and I had to grab the sheets around me to steady myself. 'I need to know now.'

Melchor presses his lips into a fine line. He did not want to tell me, and I did not want to hear it. I did not want to throw up again.

He sighs quietly, sitting down in the chair next to the couch. He sits dejectedly - his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together. 'How much do you want to know?'

'All of it.'

No more surprises. No more looking in the mirror accidentally and being terrified of the girl staring back.

He nods slowly and I take a small, shuddering breath.

'You have a concussion.' He starts quietly, his voice strained. He taps the back of my head gently. 'It is here. You might feel nauseous, and I know you have had a constant headache. Dizziness, too.'

'Melchor.' Karly whispers, her voice warning. His eyes flash to hers momentarily, before he looks back at me.

'You have multiple cracked ribs. One rib splintered and punctured your lung. I took care of that in the ER when you came in. Your



chest will be sore, and you need to try to keep your breathing slow and even so it can heal.'

'I remember that.' I shiver involuntarily, remembering the feeling of Melchor's cold hands against my side and the pain and the nurses talking about a rape kit.

'Yes, you were conscious when I put in a tube to relieve the pressure.' Melchor nods slowly, his expression in pain. 'Your spleen ruptured, and we had surgery to alleviate the bleed. Your wrist is broken, too.'

My fingers trace my cast, pressing down occasionally as if that would relieve the pain in my bones. My wrist was being squeezed. Too tight. It hurt.

I flex my fingers, cupping my wrist to my chest. It hurt.

'What does Melvin know?'

I hear Karly sigh deeply. Melchor glances at her, his lips set in a thin line.

'Everything.' Melchor whispers, remorsefully. 'He knows it all.'

It is silent in the room except for my shallow, gasping breaths.

Melvin knows everything. He saw everything. He knows what was done to me.

Karly's rubbing small circles on the back of my hand.

I want to throw up again.

It is a battle inside my head - trying to make myself stop replaying how I got each injury.

He hit my head on my headboard. That is probably when I got the concussion. He crushed my ribs with his hands. He ruptured my spleen with his knee. I remember when he broke my wrist. I remember when he gripped it so hard black spots painted my vision and shrieks filled my ears.

Where was Melvin? Why wasn't he here? He had not been there before.

I want to throw up again.

I wipe my cheeks with one good hand. My cheekbone hurt. My good hand did, too - my wrist was sore. There was an ugly bruise wrapped around my wrist.

I hide my hand beneath the blankets, disgusted.

Melvin saw my wrist too. He saw my neck. He saw what I saw when I looked into the mirror in the bathroom. He saw me, a girl who is unable to fight for herself. A girl who gave up.

Melchor lays a hand on my forearm, squeezing gently. 'It is a lot to process, Lily. We can talk about it when you are ready. For now, I want you to try to relax. Your body is tired.'

'I don't want to sleep right now.' I argue, shaking my head. I am so tired. I am so, so tired. And it hurts so much. I want to sleep and never wake up.

What if I had dreams? I always have dreams. I do not want to have dreams. I do not want them to hear me talking. I do not want them to know how weak I am.

'We'll be here the whole time, darling.' Karly tells me, bringing my attention to her. 'We won't leave, I promise.'

That only scares me more. She will know I am having dreams. She will hear me talking. She will know what I am dreaming about. She will try to wake me as Melvin did. Melvin learned not to wake me. Karly did not know that yet.

Melchor presses my shoulder gently, encouraging me to lay against the pillows on the bed. 'Sleep now, Lily. We will talk when you wake up.'

The second my body touches the pillows, it relaxes. I hate the way it relaxes but it feels so good. I am so tired. My eyes fall close as I hear Melchor murmuring to me that I just need some sleep.

I dream of a blonde man injecting me with medicine. First, it is Melchor with his bright blonde hair and gentle hands. Then it is not. Then I can feel hands on my body, pressing so hard they break bones and

ink themselves on my skin. I can feel hot breath against my skin and pain exploding in my chest. And then I gave up. Because it is easier to let the darkness consume me and to be weak than to fight.

The days seemed to creep by at a speed no one quite recognized. Some days the sun set faster than I could have blinked, and other days they would not pass no matter how much I begged. Lily's nightmares only worsened, leaving her exhausted and plagued with headaches throughout the day. Recently, she had begun refusing all forms of medicine - pill or otherwise. Melchor had been battling himself for two days about slipping small doses of pain medicine into her drinks but that was a clear violation of her autonomy and she decided against it, despite how much pain she was in. She still refused to sit or lie on any bed - remaining steadfastly sleeping on sofas downstairs or the couch in my room. Sometimes, I would watch her eye the couch skeptically, as if she could not remember whether she was comfortable sitting or not.

While she slept, however, disrupted, I slipped out of the house to hunt. My tracking had taken me as far as the Northern border of British Columbia and as far south as Nevada. I had yet to come across the scent in Lily's room. Recently, I was following random scents of vampires that had been moving in and out of town. I was never able to track them for long with the rain washing away their scents. It pained, and appeased, me that

Lily was so consumed by her pain that she did not notice my disappearing. I was thankful I could do something without leaving her feeling unloved and unprotected.

Now, Lily was asleep on the couch in the den after Naddalin Natalie managed to force a small bowl of chicken broth into Lily. She had resisted, insisting that she still felt sick from her earlier panic, but Naddalin Natalie shut her down quickly.

'Don't you lie to me, Lily.' Naddalin Natalie snapped, sitting cross-legged on the couch with the bowl of soup in her hands. 'I saw the future and I saw that you eat this soup whether you like it or not. And no, you will not throw it up later.'

That had been a lie. Naddalin Natalie had not seen the future. Lily's future was void of everything but death in Naddalin Natalie's mind.

Lily had not learned of Naddalin Natalie's troubles with her visions and resigned from the fight. She ate the soup without another complaint. We could all see her struggle to finish just a few spoons of it, her body so used to not eat that it was no longer capable of consuming more than a few mouthfuls. The meal had exhausted Lily to the point that she immediately fell asleep. Melchor was content with the fact that she had gotten something into her body, at least. We would continue to work her up to more nutritious, filling food that her body was secretly craving.

'The killings in Altoona are getting worse.' Dejen informs Melchor as he steps downstairs. Melchor breathes a sigh, shaking his head.

'I've heard this much.' Melchor responds, grimacing. 'Too many injured and missing for just a single nomad - it must be a coven.'

'It's strange they're staying.' Naddalin Natalie says.

'We'll continue to monitor the situation.' Melchor announces firmly. 'There is little else we can do without getting involved ourselves.' We cannot afford to be involved with this right now. His mind falls to Lily, thinking of her nightmares and rapid weight loss.

I listen to their conversation, not adding anything myself.

My fingers find the bruise on Lily's cheekbone, slowly tracing the edges of the black and purple discoloration as it moves toward her neck. He choked on her.

Monster.

Naddalin Natalie slips into the room quietly, sitting down at the end of the couch with her arms wrapped around her legs.

'What are you thinking?' Naddalin Natalie asks me. She had been quiet the whole night - her thoughts ridden with guilt and annoyance at herself, sadness for Lily, and confusion about the blank spaces in her abilities. She had gone through hundreds of theories as to why she was not able to see the future anymore.

Her eyes, darkening orbs, stared at me blankly.

'You shouldn't feel guilty, Naddalin Natalie.' I mumble to her.

Naddalin Natalie scoffs lightly, rolling her eyes. 'Don't tell me what to do, Melvin. Especially when you are feeling the same thing.'

Despite it being two weeks since the attack, the bruises on Lily's body were still darkening on her skin. It was unusual - but something Melchor chalked up to her sudden malnutrition.

I shiver remembering Lily's panic when she saw her face in the mirror for the first time. It had been an accident - she had been taking a shower when she caught her reflection. Two days later, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror in the hall when she caught her reflection. Her grief at the bruises that wrapped around her neck and cupped her jaw and cheekbones debilitated Jae.

I could only stomach a few moments of her cries before disappearing from the house.

I needed to find him. I need to kill him. He was a monster.

We should have held up a mirror in her face when she was in the hospital. They told her everything all at once and let her panic one time. Lily should have been kept entirely in the dark. She would be better off knowing that not everyone was privy to her injuries.

All the mirrors had disappeared from the house when I returned.

The low whispers of my family's thoughts were being interrupted by more unfamiliar ones - wolves.

I could hear the low rumblings of Chiaz Naztherth's thoughts before he called me. We need to talk.

'Chiaz Naztherth is on his way to talk to us.' I say quietly. The house goes silent at my announcement, Melchor and Dejen both breaking their conversation to look at me. Jae, who had been upstairs, appears in the doorway, defensively. Naddalin Natalie's thoughts are furious. He has been away for two weeks. What gives him the right to come now? She was fuming.

'Maybe he wants to feel important.' I mutter shrugging. Or he genuinely cares to see Lily.

The thought frustrated me more than I wanted to admit.

Why not come earlier?

I shrug at her, tracing the bruises around Lily's wrist lightly. He held her down.

He was a demon.

I stand, slowly pushing Lily's weight off my body. I instantly regretted it, seeing how uncomfortable the movement makes her in her



light sleep. Melchor, Jae, and Dejen follow me out the front door as we move to speak to Chiaz and his friends. They were standing an equal distance apart, much farther from the house than would be considered normal for a conversation.

'Good evening.' Melchor murmurs to them, nodding in their direction.

Jared, Embry, and Paul stand tall on Chiaz's flank, all defensive and waiting for an order to attack Chiaz. Chiaz had no intention of giving that order tonight.

We found two scents on our land, right near the border. Chiaz informs me bluntly.

'Could have been nomads passing through.' I told him with a slight shrug. 'There are plenty of vampires that frequent this region.'

Melchor peers at me, hoping I would explain the other side of the conversation that no one else was getting.

'Two scents on their land.' I explain hastily to Melchor, not in the mood for conversing. Melchor nods, as does Jae, though my words were not directed at him.

Strange that they would be here. Dejen is thinking.

'Some vampires from Altoona may have come South.' Jae says, shrugging slightly. 'Did they harm anyone?'

Not this time. Chiaz remarks coolly.

I scoff. If wolves were what they thought of themselves, they should be able to defend themselves.

I relay the information to Jae, who nods quizzically, recalling his information about newborn habits. The mess in Altoona was newborns who had no sense of cleaning their messes. It just was not clear who had changed them. As Dejen had thought of, a newborn vampire had little control or care to finish a meal.

'We'll keep on the lookout for any additional scents in McAuley.' Melchor tells them. 'So far, we have encountered no other vampires or the scent from Lily's room. Thank you for the update from your side, we will extend the favor if needed.'

Chiaz nods in response to Melchor. I did not come as a favor to you.

'Then why did you come?' I question, my voice cold.

'As much as we appreciate the help, your energy might be better spent on others. endeavors.' Naddalin Natalie says, her voice harsh. 'Tell your pack of mutts to stay out of our business.'

Lily is our business.

'Lily was your business.' I correct angrily. 'Not anymore. We will get it now.'

The other wolves take a step back, wanting to return to their lands, but Chiaz says. His thoughts are directed only at me now.

I need to talk to Lily.

I grimace, slightly annoyed at his firm request. It was clear he had no business here except to talk to Lily. The information he was passing along was an ill-planned excuse.

I am talking to her whether you allow me to or not.

I glare. 'That's her decision.' I mutter to him, turning my back as I walk inside the house. I hear him retreating to the forest, intending to phase back, and come to speak with Lily.

When I enter the living room, Lily is awake, though barely. Karly is coercing more water into her body, encouraging her to drink at least a few more sips from the cup. I settle down on the end of the sofa and Lily hesitantly touches the bottom of her feet to my thigh. I sigh slowly, wrapping my hand around her ankle, offering her the comfort she must have wanted. She recoils but does not pull away fully.

If only I knew what was going on in her head, I would understand these strange behaviors of hers. I would understand the strange way she reacted to food and water now, as if she wanted to starve. I would know what kept her writing and crying in her dreams and left her scared of sleep.

Now, I realized the years of studying medicine and psychology were useless when I simply relied on my mindreading abilities to understand people. Now, without any practice at normal, non-verbal cues, I was at a loss with Lily - the only human that even mattered.

Naddalin Natalie used to complain that Lily was a terrible patient with her always belittling her pain, but this Lily was much worse. This Lily seemed as if she would break at any moment, but she always refused to admit weakness.

'Chiaz is outside.' I tell Lily slowly. I do not miss the way her body jumps, her eyes wide with a strange excitement. Her sudden change of stature makes my dead heart prickle with something - annoyance or jealousy of the dog. 'He wants to talk with you. Is that all right?'

'Yes.' Lily's voice is the happiest I have heard since she woke up in the hospital, and that makes me slightly more upset. Had I done something wrong to inhibit these feelings in her? There was something about Chiaz Naztherth that brought them all out that I did not have.

I do not miss the pride in Chiaz's head, either, as he walks giddily into the house to talk to Lily.

'A little privacy, please?' He mutters to me as he passes by, dropping onto the floor next to Lily's head. 'Hey bells.'

I sigh, slightly irritated, standing up. Lily watches me without a word, though I can tell she dislikes my threat of leaving.

'Hi.' She squeaks quietly, with a small smile on her face.

'You look like crap.' Chiaz retorts with a shake of his head. I stiffen at his words, but Naddalin Natalie puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, reminding me to give them their time and conversation.

'I think I might kill him.' Naddalin Natalie says to me. She sits on the kitchen island, pulling her knees to her chest.

'I think I'll help.'

We stay wordlessly across from each other, both staring at the marbled countertops.

I was, without shame, listening to Chiaz's and Lily's conversation, and Naddalin Natalie - slightly more shameful - was doing the same.

'Are they feeding you at all?' Chiaz asks. 'Or is your diet strictly blood?' It is. Dunno how sick they are over here. Do they even have food?

I grit my teeth tightly, trying not to let his thoughts get to me. Chiaz Naztherth had never been one for decorum.

'No. I am just not hungry.'

'So, you're just anorexic now.' They are intentionally starving her.

'That's mean.' Lily mumbles under her breath. I had not noticed how weak her voice sounded today. Last night's dreams had truly exhausted her.

'Are they keeping you awake at night too? Throwing water on your face when you start dozing off?' Chiaz jokes, though his thoughts were dark, remembering how he and his sisters faced nightmares following their mother's car accident.

Despite his clear attempts not to think about it, his mind kept fishing back to the day he yanked clothes onto her body and raced her to the hospital. My body cringes in pain each time I see Lily in his thoughts.

'You should come to the Rez, Bells. My house is not a royal palace, but at least we fed you.'

'They feed me here.'

'Sure.'

'Stop it.'

'Seriously, Bells. You look like a ghost.' Chiaz says his voice is much grimmer than before. She will kill herself in a week like this. Why isn't the doc doing anything? Does he even want her to get better? Charlie

said he had the header out of the hospital faster than normal. Something about comfort for her. That was stupid.

'Get some sleep. I will come back later.' Need to talk to Sam

'No.' Lily's voice is panic-ridden, and I hear her grasp Chiaz's clothes, keeping him where he was.

What?

'I don't sleep well.'

'I can see it in your face.' You look worse than when he left you for dead. I bet your dreams are back.

I wince slightly at Chiaz's memory of Lily's skinny, exhausted form. She was a ghost when I was gone, but she looked worse now.

'It's land of the living dead over here.' was Chiaz's nonchalant response, not hinting at his grim thoughts. 'Probably wouldn't be able to sleep here either.'

'I have nightmares.'

Do they wake her up when she starts screaming at night? I used to have awful nightmares after Mom died.

'I'm sorry.'

'I don't like to close my eyes.'

'Maybe Melchor can give you something for that -'

Lily's quick to protest, as I expected her to. 'No!' she cut him off sharply, her heart panicked in her chest. 'No medicine.'

Chiaz sighs loudly. 'Yeah, okay.' He is quiet, then he continues. 'What are you going to do then? Drive yourself to exhaustion until you cannot help but sleep?' That is the Lily thing to do.

Lily does not respond.

'You really do look like crap, Bells. I am serious, why don't you come to the Rez for a bit? We can go to the beach, have some food, and then I will safely return to you here in like two hours. Do not worry about the leech, I will deal with him.' She looks like she is dead. Bet that is the way he likes her - looking like a meal or a bloodsucker. Pathetic. I would never treat her this way. I did not before.

I grit my teeth, my jaw locking tightly.

I knew he intentionally thought provocatively to get a reaction from me, which was incredibly frustrating when Lily insisted that we get along. As immature as it was of me to consider, Chiaz Naztherth had been the one to start the fight when I tried to make peace with him. He was the one who brought the bikes to Lily's father. He was the one who stood there, thinking of all the ways I had harmed Lily and he had patched her up. He was there, reminding me that if I left, Lily would eventually be content with him.



And I could do nothing but listen because he was right. He had taken care of Lily and saved her life in all the times I could not, he had witnessed all the ways I harmed Lily with my actions, and he was right that Lily might have loved him one day if I had stayed gone long enough.

But I was not gone for enough time. Lily's love for me was so incredibly potent that she risked her life without a thought to journey to the most dangerous city on the planet. She did that for me.

Now, at this moment, Chiaz and I wasted each other over the same girl who had picked me but might have picked him had I given them more time.

'I'm too tired, Jake.' Lily responds only moments later. 'Maybe another time.'

'Bells, don't do that.' Chiaz whines at her. 'I am serious, come with me. You can sleep there if you want.'

'No.'

'Bells, Charlie is already out on the Rez with Billy. He misses you; you know. He always talks about how quiet and different you are on his visits, how he misses how you used to be. He came to the Rez right after his visit with you today. He looked awful.'

I clenched my jaw even tighter. This is not what he should be telling her. Of course, she would be different. No one is ever the same

after a traumatizing experience, let alone one so violent and cruel. No one expected her to be the same.

'No, Jake.'

Chiaz sighs again, more defeated. 'Another day?'

I hear the scraping of Lily's head on the couch as she nods slowly.

Did the leeches tell her to say no? Manipulative freaks.

Damnit.

'Bells, what happened?' Chiaz says after a long moment of silence. I stiffened; my hands pressed hard against the countertop.

Naddalin Natalie shouts me a worried look, a warning not to go into the room and interrupt their conversation.

'What?' She sounds groggy, like she was falling asleep when he spoke.

'That day. What happened?'

Lily does not respond immediately, and I recognize the way her breaths are turning into short, anxious pants. She was going to have a panic attack. 'Nothing.'

Chiaz scoffs at her, nearly laughing. 'Crap. No one looks like you two weeks after nothing happened.'

'Ask someone else.' Lily mumbles. 'I don't know what happened.'

I know she has a concussion, but it is not bad enough to cause memory loss. One of the leeches has some memory control thing. Why did Lily even stick around after the hell they put her through?

'I'm serious Bells, stop joking around.'

'I'm not.' Lily responds stiffly.

'I know you're lying.' Chiaz snaps at her quietly.

'If he makes her upset, I'll break his bones.' Or she would just hate him enough that she would decide on her own to never see him again.

Naddalin Natalie's eyes flash to me, dark orbs filled with understanding.

'If you want the truth, go ask Melchor.' Lily's voice is a little angry when she responds. 'He's the one that treated me anyway.'

I wanted to go into the room and push him away from her and promise that she did not need to tell anyone what happened. No one else needed to know if she did not want them to.

'You know I was the one who found you, right?' Chiaz asked her, his voice slightly hurt. He remembers the painful contortions of her body when he first found her, the wheezing of her breath as she struggled

to breathe with her punctured lungs and broken ribs. How he had grabbed a blanket and wrapped her body up before rushing her to the hospital.

'I remember.' Lily mumbles quietly.

Chiaz is quiet for a long moment, and I can hear him debating how to respond to her, how to make his words less blunt. 'Then you know I have a pretty good idea of what happened.'

I hiss under my breath and Naddalin Natalie squeezes her hand on my arm, reminding me to stay calm.

'He's gotten her to think about this more than we have.'

Naddalin Natalie reminds me quietly. 'Let him. She might talk to him.'

'He's more willing to risk her breaking, Naddalin Natalie.' I growl at him. 'Pushing her only makes her panic.'

'Let him, Melvin.' Naddalin Natalie's voice is firm, and I glare at her, upset with her demand. Talking helps, sometimes. Let her talk to her friend. You know we need this information, too.

Chiaz Naztherth did not deserve Lily as a friend.

'I am here, Lily. Which means you can trust me.' Chiaz is saying, and I can hear the desperation in his voice and thoughts to get her to say something to him. He was pushing her much farther than I had ever, and I was incredibly hateful of his stupidity.

'Why weren't you here before?'

It was Lily. I will always be here, even when they all leave you like nothing. I was with you every time you needed me when your bloodsucker was gone.

'I was, Bells.'

'Now, Jake. I mean now.' Lily's voice is so timid, almost fearful of his reaction to what she was saying. Did she expect him to be angry with her? To leave her as I left her? 'Why did you leave me at the hospital?'

Chiaz's voice falters as he struggles to find an appropriate way to explain it to Lily. 'I could not stay. Sam told me to leave, you know how it is with the alpha thing.'

'Right, I forgot about that.' Lily mumbles. I cannot tell if she is still mad at him or not.

'But I'm here now.'

Lily does not respond, and I can taste her salty tears with every breath I take. He made her cry. I was getting increasingly aggravated by him talking to her.

'Enough torturing her!' I hissed under my breath, fully aware that the mutt could hear me. 'Tell her what you need to and leave.'

I can hear Karly's disapproving thoughts upstairs, upset with my hostility towards Lily's friend. I ignore her.

'I was at the hospital every damn day, Bells.' Jake swears firmly, ignoring me completely. 'I could not go inside knowing it was safer for you if I was outside protecting the hospital. Ask any of your bloodsuckers, they all saw me.'

Lily breathes a shaky breath in. 'Thank you.'

'I will always be there to protect you, Lily. I swear to my life.' Jake tells her gently. 'Even if, from now on, I must follow you everywhere I go until the bastard is killed. Even if it means picking up the pieces of you when they all leave you again.'

I hear the marble countertop crack loudly beneath my hands as he speaks, as he mentions my departure again. As his thoughts echo the prospects of Lily being his one day.

Naddalin Natalie watches me wearily, but her thoughts are seething.

Chiaz Naztherth was not as easy to break as the countertop, but I would gladly do it.

Lily does not respond again.

'For now, though, it is best that you do not starve to death. I do not think the bloodsuckers know how to use the kitchen.' Chiaz chuckles bitterly, and to my utter shock, I hear Lily make a small sound under her breath with him.

I could feel my whole-body course with euphoria - I am not sure she had laughed at all since she wound up in the hospital. The fact that Chiaz elicited that laugh made me furious, but Lily laughed.

Naddalin Natalie and I are still standing across from the now shattered counter when Chiaz walks into the kitchen. He spots the crack going through the marble, grinning widely.

'Was it something I said?' He passes me, reaching to open the fridge. 'Damn lot of food for vamps who do not eat. How much blood did you lace it with?'

'The pots are there.' Naddalin Natalie tells him, ignoring the rude comment. She gestures towards a cabinet next to the stove. 'If you need something, we can make a trip to McAuley.'

'Nah, it's fine.' Chiaz shrugs, grabbing some ingredients and laying them on the cracked countertop. 'She's not on a human diet, I heard last time.'

Naddalin Natalie grimaces slightly, irritated by the comment. 'Watch yourself, mutt.' She hisses, walking out of the kitchen.

'I'm not surprised you didn't tell her I came to visit.' Chiaz says to me, his voice slightly accusatory as he envisions me with dark eyes.

I grimace, my jaw hard as I stare at him. 'I understand that Lily considers you to be a good person and even a friend, but that is where my insight ends.'

'So, you stop her from seeing me and manipulate the facts.'

Chiaz snaps, annoyed. His eyes narrow in my direction and I can see how difficult it is for him to turn away from me, returning to the carrots he was chopping on the counter. 'I know you stopped her all those times from coming to the Rez.'

I do not respond. I watch as he cuts the carrots ruggedly without precision.

'You know, she called me. She asked me to come pick her up when you left.'

I looked away from Chiaz, knowing it would be difficult to not attack him if we made eye contact. 'I'm sure you can understand why I might be uncomfortable with Lily being around wolves.' I muttered in response, not even caring that I was attacking his species.

'Afraid she'll realize that she'll just turn into a snack if she stays here?' Chiaz seethes. He was getting bolder and viler in his words.

'Careful, mutt.' I force my voice to be calm, but it is a lost attempt. 'You're on our side of the border now.'



'And I am sure you know how I feel about her here with you - a merciless bloodsucker. The reason for the treaty.' Chiaz spits.

I can feel Jae's influence, trying to calm us both down and I want him to stop. Chiaz seems slightly uncomfortable by the manipulation of his emotions, though I am not sure he realizes it is Jae's doing.

'Chiaz, I would never harm her.' My voice is incredibly bleak when I respond, and I know it is the bizarre form of exhaustion that Melchor finds himself facing at times. It was strange - I was incredibly tired, though I did not seem to crave sleep or rest of any sort.

Chiaz turns to glare at me, his hands shaking. His thoughts flew back to the ghost of Lily when I had gone. 'Do you even know what she was like before? Has Charlie not told you anything?' She was dead in that forest, bloodsucker.

'I left to protect her. To prevent something like this from happening.' I hiss at him, seeing red. He bares his teeth, gripping the knife in his hand.

'Maybe you should've stayed away.' He snaps at me, turning back to the food. She would have realized what was good for her. She would have learned to live again.

His thoughts were infuriating me - he was remembering how Lily had improved after they became close, how she started smiling and

eating more. I grind my teeth tightly together as he arrogantly imagines fixing her up until she is perfect because I, as always, was the root of her issue. And I, according to him, would never be capable of helping her; only harming her.

'You know you're not good for her either.' I tell him quietly.  
'Neither of us are.'

He seethes, staring at the vegetables, his hands shaking. Get out of this rotten place. 'I'll send some food with Charlie.' He tosses the knife onto the counter, leaving the kitchen quickly.

The front door slams as he exits the house.

## 25 Debates

Instead of going upstairs to debate with him, I decided to go to the sitting room with Lily. She is asleep on the couch, her face distorted in pain but still unconscious. I settled down on the couch beside her, my fingers rubbing at one of the fading bruises on her arm. They were healing so slowly. Her body had no excess nutrients or energy to focus on recovery - it was purely attentive to survival.

She was still alive. She was still breathing. My reason for existence was safe beside me.

It was a mantra I kept up in my head to limit my thoughts of finding her attacker and ripping the dog's head off his shoulders.

My body feels heavy when I wake up as if I weigh a thousand pounds. Moving my fingers is like trying to move through pounds and pounds of sand. Melvin is silently beside me, helping me sit without a word or hesitation. My muscles in my body are sore and every movement makes me want to cry. Crying would only make Melchor insist on medicine, which would only make me panic and none of that would ease the exhausting pain I was feeling.

'How did you sleep?' Melvin asks me. His voice sounds unnaturally forced. It was strangely familiar.

How did I sleep? Terribly. I felt as if I had not slept at all. My head was pounding worse than it did on my first day in the hospital. Was there maximum pain for concussions? I had had plenty in my life, but they never seemed to hurt as much as this one did. I had never experienced such debilitating nausea or dizziness either.

I was sorely frustrated.

Melchor had been promising my pain and aches would ease with time, and they did. For a few short days slow, deliberate movements did not send spasms of pain through my muscles the way they did before. My nausea trickled in and out, allowing some time for slow eating and drinking to appease those around me. Though my nightmares had not

lessened, it was easier to fight the memories in my waking hours when I was not shunned by my pain.

But it all came back. Raging and furious with its short absence. Since yesterday's panic attack and fainting spell, I had felt the pain return with vengeance throughout my entire body.

'Fine.' I mumble. Melvin did not need to hear my woes about sleeping. I did enough sleeping for him to understand that it was never satisfying.

'Any dreams?' I had heard this tone from him before, I just was not sure when.

My heart stutters under his quiet, patient gaze. Yes, so many dreams, Melvin. I dreamt of it repeatedly. I felt his hands on me. I felt my wrist breaking in his grasp. My legs get pushed apart. I felt his knee on my stomach. I felt the pain in my chest as I begged him not to do it. And each time, I slipped into a strange blackness that never reduced the pain or the awareness of what his hands did to me.

My body shudders without my permission as I remember the horrifying dreams. It was strange that I had not woken up screaming or even talked at all. Whatever surge of luck I was having now, I hoped it did not end. No one needed to know what I was dreaming of and how disgusted I felt waking up each morning.

'No.'

His dark eyes watch my face carefully before he finally nods.

'Good.' His voice was off.

His expression blanks. His body tenses. This Melvin - numb, removed, and quiet - was too familiar to me. It made me feel numb.

'You did not eat any dinner last night. How about breakfast?'

He offers, sitting up beside me. 'There are some pancakes already made downstairs.'

He does not mention that I missed dinner because of a panic attack. That I screamed so much my throat felt raw.

I shake my head, instantly regretting it. My few days of rescinding head pain were gone. 'I'm not hungry.'

Melvin does not seem to hear me as he helps me up. 'Let us go downstairs. Charlie will be coming soon.'

'And you'll be leaving?' I mumble, pushing my thick hair away from my face. I reach for a rubber band, then drop it knowing Naddalin Natalie will tie my hair up when we get downstairs. It will hurt my ribs too much to tie my hair back.

Melvin eyes me, his lips set in a thin line, but does not say a word. Instead, he helps me into my sweater that was lounging on the foot of the bed.

It has been getting easier to walk, even if I lack the energy to move. Melvin always is prepared to carry me, though, insisting that his interference is faster and easier.

In less than a second, he is sitting me on the couch in the main sitting room. He sits next to me, throwing a blanket over both of us.

I always was cold.

I pull my legs as close to my chest as possible before it becomes too painful, laying my head against Melvin's shoulder. He is gentle as he wraps his hands in mine, but his hesitance to touch me makes my stomach hurt.

'Here you are, dear.' Karly comes, bringing a small plate piled with pancakes and syrup. Melvin accepts the plate for me despite my earlier objections.

'You're getting too thin.' Karly tells me quietly, patting my head. She disappears upstairs without another word, leaving me and Melvin alone with the pancakes.

Melvin is quiet as he cuts the food for me, his face entirely blank.

'When will Charlie be here?' I mumble, taking the plate as Melvin hands it to me.

I stab a small piece of pancake with my fork, trying my hardest not to look too nauseated. There is no point in pretending - I cannot eat. My stomach is a mess of anxiety and pain. I drop the fork back onto the plate, wanting the whole thing to just disappear.

'In an hour or so.' Melvin responds. He is clicking the buttons on the remote faster than the TV can react, and I can see the small dents his fingertips are making in the thick plastic. 'You should hunt.' I mumble after a long moment of silence.

Melvin's black eyes flash to mine for just a second before they are back on the TV. The volume is too low for me to hear, and I doubt that Melvin was catching anything beyond fragments of words before he switched the channel again.

'I'm fine, Lily.' His voice is tight when he responds. I can feel his hand tightening on mine. I have always known Melvin to be controlled around me, but it seemed like he was losing it now.

'No, you're not.'

'I'm fine.' Melvin says again, his voice curt.

'I won't call Chiaz if that's what you're worried about.' I mutter under my breath, feeling frustrated by his behavior towards me.

Melvin hisses, the sound startling me so much I jump. Melvin does not respond to my shock, instead, his eyes stay trained on the TV. But the remote was cracked into three pieces in his hand.

'You're torturing yourself by not hunting.' I press. 'You haven't hunted since.' I trail off, my stomach churning as I realize the end of my sentence.

Before the attack. Several weeks before the attack.

'You haven't eaten since then either.' Melvin responds, the plastic remote cracks in his hand as the channel switches from tennis to an old black-and-white film.

'This isn't about me.'

He lets out a hard, cold laugh. 'Isn't it?'

'I'm serious, Melvin.'

'I am, too, Lily!' Melvin snaps at me, his face hard. 'I will not die if I starve, but you will. And you will make all of us watch while you slowly wither away, won't you?'

Melvin's hand pulls from mine, and he has gone before I can even blink.

My hand drops heavily to the couch, and the painful feeling of rejection is a much deeper pit in my stomach now. His sudden disappearance is like a knife through my gut. I can already feel moisture



forming in my eyes - misery, anger, and frustration. I wanted the old Melvin back - the one who never hesitated to hold my hands, to kiss my neck, to brush his hand over my hair. He was gone now.

A small sound in the corner of my room made me jump and I looked over to see Melchor standing patiently in the doorway. That was the noise: he had put the book down on the table. My stomach twists as I spy the book, so I turn my eyes to Melchor instead.

'I'm sorry.' He offers gently, smiling. 'I didn't mean to scare you.' He walks towards me. 'There's something about Thomas Hobbes that's thought-worthy, even as a vampire my age.'

'Who?' I mumble, accepting Melchor's attempt to ignore Melvin's abrupt departure. Melchor reaches for a white blanket that was folded on the table, he walks over to me, laying it across me. I cuddled into it, realizing just how cold I was even with the blanket Melvin had given me.

'He's an English philosopher from the seventeenth century. He died less than two decades before I did.' It always shocked me a little just how old Melchor was, despite his eternally youthful face. This time was no different and Melchor smiled widely at my expression. 'I was reading one of his many books I have collected. His works were the first I learned

about when I went back to study. I studied history and philosophy first; such was the culture at the time.'

'How many degrees do you have?' I mumble.

Melchor laughs, sitting down next to me. 'Too many, Lily. But never enough, it seems. The world changes very quickly, doesn't it?'

I did not answer. I had only been alive for eighteen years.

'Tell me why you won't eat.' Melchor says after a long moment of silence. He does not look at me, he stares straight ahead at the TV as he talks.

'I'm nauseous.' My voice was always so quiet. So meek. I hated it, but I could never get my voice to cooperate. 'I have a migraine.'

Melchor nods gently. 'Nausea and migraines can be caused by hunger, Lily. You have not eaten a proper meal in over two weeks.'

'I can't.'

'Let's start small.' Melchor suggests patiently. He turns to me, his dark golden eyes watching me as he takes the plate of pancakes. 'Vegetable broth or apple sauce? Something to settle your stomach.'

I shake my head slowly. I did not want anything.

Melchor offers me a small smile. 'You must eat, Lily. Even if it is just a few bites at a time.' Melchor's tone is firm, though gentle. 'If there's something else, you'd like instead, let us know.'

I nod slowly, lowering my head against the armrest of the sofa. I am so tired.

Melchor does not say anything more, but he stays sitting beside me with his hand on top of mine. It is comforting and soon I find myself dipping between consciousness and unconsciousness.

As I drift, I hear voices. Sometimes they shock me out of sleep only to go quite enough for me to settle again, and other times they talk so softly, so comfortingly that I lie and listen to the murmurs that I cannot make out into words. I feel gentle hands on me at times, too. Some adjust the weight of the blanket over my body, some press their lips to my forehead, and others brush the hair from my face. I hear my name sometimes and those words always make me flinch, make me wish I could disappear from the room while they discuss who attacked me.

The house seemed much quieter than normal when I finally woke up. Melchor and I had been alone in the room for far longer than normal with no lingering voices of the others. I lower my head against the headrest, my exhausted body feeling the weight of my nightmares. Last night's disturbed sleep was already catching up to me.

I am just slipping into sleep again when the doorbell rings. Melchor is off the couch in a second, walking slowly to the door to let my

father inside. I snuggle deeper into my blankets, wishing with all my might that I could disappear into them.

I wish harder, squeezing my hands into fists, as heavy footsteps get closer.

'Hey kiddo.' Charlie says quietly. He sighs deeply when he sees me, his face full of worry. 'You look tired.'

'I'm fine.' I whisper, trying to sit up. The movement causes excruciating pain in my skull, and I immediately discard the idea of moving at all. On top of my exhaustion, the pain would not be subsiding today.

Charlie plops himself down onto the couch across from me, shaking his head. 'You look terrible, Bells.'

I am not sure how to respond to Charlie. He is right - I do look terrible. I have not seen myself in the mirror in a long time. All the mirrors had been removed from the house after I first peered into one. I was thankful to whoever removed them.

'Are you sleeping at all?' he prods, his eyes narrowing at me. If anything, Charlie looked worse than me. He had lost weight and the bags under his eyes alerted me that he was the one unable to sleep at night.

'I'm fine, Dad.' I whisper, a bit forcefully. I regret my words as I watch Charlie digest them. 'I'm sleeping, I promise.' I add, trying to make him feel a bit better.

'Good.'

'Are you eating?' I question quietly, tugging the blankets closer to my body. I was so cold. 'You lost weight.'

'Yeah.' He mumbles, leaning heavily against the sofa. 'Sue's been making me food. And Karly, too. Karly sends home so much food.' He cracks a small smile then, his eyes crinkling around the edges. 'Don't tell her, but I really prefer Sue's food.'

I grimace, trying to hold back a smile. Karly was perfectly capable of hearing him no matter where she was in this house.

'I am just not used to gourmet food, Bells. It is strange.'

'Karly does make fancy food.' I agree and Charlie laughs at my words. His loud laugh seems out of place in the quiet, empty house.

'Sue's fish is great. You know how I like fish.'

'I am sorry, Dad. I would make you something if I could.'

'Don't do that, kid.' Charlie mutters, his shoulders sagging.

'Don't try to take care of me right now.'

I cannot do anything but bite my lip in response. Charlie falls silent then, his eyes flickering from my face to the TV and then back

again. A football game is playing, and it interests him because he eventually reaches to turn the volume a bit louder. He lapses into silence, leaning back in his seat as he watches.

The volume of the TV is making my headache a bit worse, and I wish Charlie would turn it off.

'Have you called Allison?' Charlie slips the words quietly and slowly as if he wishes I would not hear them.

'No. Do I need to call her again?' I turn to look at Charlie, narrowing my eyes to him. He looks a little regretful under my gaze.

Charlie grimaces, scratching his neck slightly. 'I know what you said about being a little more with Allison, but I do think you should talk to her.'

I close my eyes, sighing. Today would just be a miserable day for me.

'I am serious, Lily. I respected your decision to stay here and not to file a police report - even though I still think you should consider that, there's time to file still - but not telling Allison is something else entirely. I am all about respecting your choices now, I guess. But this one I must stand firm on.'

If Charlie did not need to know, I would not have told him either. Allison would be inconsolable if she knew her daughter had been

raped. She would fly to McAuley immediately, or, worse, fly me to Phoenix. I would never know peace again under the care of my mother.

'Dad, you saw how she reacted to my accident in Phoenix.' Talking made my head vibrate. 'She'll be livid if she knows about this.'

'I know, I know. But lying to her is not right.' Charlie insists, throwing his hands up in frustration. 'She's eventually going to find out.'

'No, she won't, Dad.' I work to make my voice firm. 'You're not going to tell her, are you?'

'No.'

'Well, neither am I. She will stay in the dark on this one.'

Charlie sighs, leaning back against the couch, admitting defeat. 'I am not with you on that, Lily. But call her, okay? She has been calling me asking for updates and I do not know what to tell her anymore.'

'I'll call her tonight.'

Charlie acknowledges my words with a nod before falling silent. It is not exceptionally long before Karly makes her way downstairs, offering Charlie some coffee and breakfast. He accepts Karly's offer and soon, I am sitting with a bowl of steaming broth in my hands that Karly promises will help me feel better and Charlie is inhaling a large stack of pancakes I had previously rejected.

Karly sits with us, making polite conversation with Charlie as she sketches in one of her books. Charlie is still under the impression that Jae, Dejen, and Vivian are out of town attending college. According to Karly, all three of them are enjoying their time and are planning a trip home soon.

By lunchtime, Charlie and I are both exhausted from his uncharacteristically talkative visit, and he leaves with a promise to visit again tomorrow.

'What will you say to your mother?' Karly asks me lightly. She has been humming over her sketch pad for over an hour now and the sound is quite comforting, not even slightly bothersome to my headache.

I struggle for a response because I am not sure what to say. Charlie, thankfully, got me off the hook the first time by telling Allison I had fallen. He had fielded most of her calls because she was too afraid to bother me - it would interfere with my recovery. But Charlie was right. She deserved more from me, and she deserved to hear my voice.

'I'm not sure.'

'Hmm.' Karly offers me a smile, putting her sketchbook down. 'You can offer to visit her when you are feeling better. Then she might not be so persistent about coming here to visit.'

'Maybe.' I take a sip of the tea that Karly had given me.



'There isn't much that can sway a mother's love, Lily.' Karly continues gently. 'Allison is just trying to take care of you in any way she can. We all are.'

I feel as if I have only closed my eyes for a moment as Karly's talking. When I open my eyes, the room is black except for a single lamp lit in the corner. Karly is not sitting on the chair across from me with her sketchbook anymore. I knew, then, that I had fallen asleep.

'Drink.' Melvin's voice is close to my ear, and I jump at the sudden order. He is sitting beside the couch, holding a small glass of water beside me. I obliged hesitantly, sucking cool water through the straw until the raw taste in my mouth is gone and my throat is less dry. 'I apologize for leaving, Lily. I realize I hurt you in the way I acted, and my intentions were not to do that.'

'It's fine.' I mumble self-consciously, wishing I could hide from his intense gaze. His eyes were remorseful, matching his tone exactly. It was an interesting change from his emotion-less expression and blank tone earlier.

'No, it's not.' Melvin's jaw is stiff, and his voice is hard. 'I have no right to disregard you like that. I will not do it again.'

I nodded slowly, accepting his apology. He did not know it, but he would do it again. Just then, Dejen strolls in, grinning widely.

'Did he apologize like a gentleman, Lily?' He asks heartily, his voice booming and making me wince slightly. I had only been around Dejen a few times in the past two weeks and in those instances, he was focused on other things. I had forgotten how loud Dejen was, and how big he looked while standing.

I stared curiously at Dejen, then, wondering what he meant by his words. 'He did.' I respond confused.

Dejen grins wider. 'Good. Otherwise, Jae and I would have had to drag him outside and beat the pulp out of him. Again.'

'What?' I gasp, shock coursing through me. 'What did you and Jae do?'

Did they attack him? I knew Melvin was strong. I had seen the way he pulled Pierre off me in the ballet studio. He also had an advantage with his mind-reading abilities. But could he take on both Jae and Dejen? Dejen was so big compared to Melvin.

Dejen laughs loudly at my reaction, bending over in his fit and Melvin growls at him menacingly, his grip on my hand tightening slightly.

'Relax, Lily.' He breathes, plopping down onto the couch. 'We did not rough him up too bad. I think Vivian might have, though. But he is back in one piece, isn't he?'

'Vivian?' I squeak, even more, shocked. Vivian defended me?

'Dejen, enough.' Melvin barks stiffly. His face had gone from remorseful to hard, and suddenly I wished Dejen had not said anything either. My Melvin, the one who did not always mask his emotions, had retreated. I am not surprised by the sure movements of Melvin as his hand pulls away from mine, but that does not stop the pain through shots through my body as he does so. I missed my Melvin.

Dejen laughs again at Melvin's reaction, shaking his head as he reaches for the remote - a new one had replaced the cracked one - and flips the TV. The channel that pops up is a news channel and I roll gently to my side so I can see the TV more easily. There is no point in staring at Melvin's blank face when I can feel less pain staring at the TV.

'Investigators are considering gang activity, at this point.' The news anchor was saying, her hands fluttering nervously around her. 'With two more bodies found this afternoon.'

'Damn nomads.' Dejen grumbles, glaring at the TV. 'Need to clean up their own damn messes.'

'Dejen.' Melvin snarls. I jump uneasily at his tone, and Melvin turns to me quickly, apologetically.

'What?' I whispered to Melvin, trying to relax the sudden sprint my heart had decided to go on. It was trying to jump out of my chest, through my throat.

'Melvin doesn't want you to know, it'll worry you.' Dejen rolls his eyes at Melvin, throwing his arm over the couch. 'Nomadic vampires have decided to hit Altoona as a massacre site. Newborns vamps. So far, a bunch of people have gone missing.'

'Charlie told me about that.' I mumble, biting my lip. 'I did not realize it was vampires. That is so close.'

As I speak, I feel the familiar ache in my head worsening.

'You're safe, Lily.' Melvin tells me firmly. 'Don't worry about it.'

He had told me that before. He told me that before Pierre attacked me. He told me that before he left me in the forest. He told me that when we got back from Italy. But, despite all my protections, we were still in this situation.

'When did they start?' I asked Dejen, knowing that nomads did not stay in a particular area for exceptionally long.

Red static covers my vision in pulses. Pulses perfectly coincide with the pounding at the back of my head.

'Three weeks ago.' Dejen answers coolly, switching the channels as a police officer comes into view to explain more about the murders. 'They should leave soon.'

'We'll take of it, Lily.' Melvin promises confidently.

'Pathetic.' Dejen shakes his head, gesturing wildly toward the game on the TV. 'Lily, this has to be the dumbest game I've ever seen.'

It was strange that Dejen was being so easy-going right now, watching TV like he normally would have done before the attack. Everyone else seemed so wound up - when they were home, which was rare.

Today Melchor and Karly did nothing but encourage me to eat or drink water, or they wanted me to get up and walk around or sleep. Naddalin Natalie had been hiding upstairs for hours before quietly placing herself at my feet to stare at nothing for several more hours. Jae followed her - hugging the walls as he moved around the house. He always stayed close to control the atmosphere, and I welcomed the calming waves Jae let wash over the room.

And Melvin was Melvin, but the emotion-concealed Melvin. He was the one who rarely touched me and talked in a bleak voice that made me feel numb.

It was strange that the lives of the Shezor family seemed entirely revolved around me now.

Dejen was the most easy-going of all his family members. I imagined he might be just as serious as the rest of them when the time called for it, considering that is how he was when Pierre decided to make

me his next target. But now, here he was, screaming at the TV and trying to explain the stupidity of football moves as if the world was not tense and suffocating around us.

'I can coach a team better than that any day, Lily.' He was yelling, threatening to change the channel to something worth his time. No one reacted to his boisterous noise or ridiculous behavior during such a stressful time. It seemed like no one cared, or no one even realized it was happening.

'I don't understand football, Dejen.' was the only response I could give him after his numerous comments pointed directly at me.

'Well, obviously! No one can understand football when it is being played like this.' Dejen rolls his eyes theatrically, tossing the remote onto the table. The rigid plastic cracks heartily against the oak. He turns his whole body away from the game, right toward me. 'Bells,'

I flinch at the use of my nickname. No one had called me that recently, though I was unsure of why it bothered me. I did not want the memories to infiltrate my brain, but a significant part of me wondered if he had ever used it and bridged an unconscious negative association with the name.

Dejen hesitates for a split second and then continues talking. 'The quarterback is the most important player on the field, and they just pushed him out of the game!'

I picked up a small piece of the croissant that Naddalin Natalie had given to me hours ago. My hand is shaking, and I can see Dejen watching how the croissant trembles. I suddenly feel exceptionally self-conscious and drop the croissant back onto the plate.

I would not be able to eat it anyway. I was not hungry, even if my nausea was subsiding slowly over time.

'That doesn't make a lot of sense.'

'Exactly!' Dejen groans, shaking his head again. 'When you're a vampire, I'll teach you how to play real football, Lily.'

I do not miss the way Melvin hisses at Dejen and the way Dejen rolls his eyes in response. Melvin was still not on board with my transformation. Even an attack like this would not change his stubborn mind. Dejen turns his back to Melvin, clearly ignoring his brother's irritation and focusing on me.

'I am serious, Lily. This is the worst game I have ever seen - and I have seen a lot.' Dejen grins and I cannot help but smile at his enthusiasm. I have missed Dejen and his ridiculously fun behavior. His booming voice rarely shook the house the way it did now.

'You should play, Dejen.' I grin. 'Major leagues.'

Dejen snorts. 'That's Kickball, Bells.' I do not flinch when he uses my nickname this time, and it pleases him. 'You mean the NFL.'

'Oh.' I can feel my face go hot, and Dejen grins.

'Playing myself doesn't seem fair to humans.' Dejen chuckles. 'With their slow brains and frail bodies.'

'That's rude.'

'It is true. I also would not be able to rise too high up in the ranks, otherwise someone might notice.' He flashes his teeth, obviously insinuating his vampire nature. 'Where's the fun in staying mediocre?'

'Don't forget the blood from injuries.'

'Precisely.' Dejen grabs the remote, switching the channel to something new. 'You like hockey, Lily?'

'Never watched it.'

Dejen makes a face at me, clearly horrified. 'Watch this, you uninformed kid.'

I turn my eyes to the TV, watching large-bodied men skating around with sticks. I understood the basics of hockey: get the puck into the other team's goal. But that was it. My mind seemed too blank to work out the intricacies of the sport and the motions that made Dejen shake his head in disgust.



'Chiaz Naztherth is coming.' Melvin groans after a moment of silence. I pulled my eyes away from the TV, swallowing thickly as I watched Melvin's face morph into complete annoyance.

Melvin mutters something under his breath, standing up suddenly.

I follow suit, sitting up slowly. Confusion and excitement poured through me, and then gratitude that my movement did not make my body hurt the way it normally would. My body was finally healing, it seemed.

Chiaz had come several days ago but I had not heard from him since, other than Charlie, bringing some pasta Jake had made for me.

Somehow, Melvin looks even more irritated than before as he stalks toward the front door.

'What does the dog want now?' Dejen mumbles, standing up.

'Be nice, Dejen.' I say, pulling myself up to stand. It was difficult - trying to force my whole weight off the couch when my ribs still ached. I had only one hand to push myself up with, which was disastrous. Dejen shakes his head at me, making a quiet comment about fragile human bodies, pulling me up.

'Here.' Dejen grabs the throw blanket I had been previously buried under, wrapping it around my shoulders. 'Don't freeze outside.'

'It's April, Dejen.' I snap at him, but I wrap my arms around the blanket anyway because I know I will need it and because it is still warm from my body heat. If anything, the blanket helps hide the way my body trembles weakly as I stand.

'Would you stay inside if I asked you to?' Melvin asks me, his voice tight and his expression upset.

'I'm not staying inside.'

Melvin groans, shaking his head at me. 'Of course not.' His face is hard as he walks to the door and I, much slower, stumble after him.

'You could have called.' Melvin's voice is like steel razors.

I am about to berate Melvin for his tone when Chiaz responds in a voice that makes me recoil.

'I don't have any leeches on my speed dial.' Chiaz crosses his arms over his bare muscled chest.

My heart pounds in my chest. Was he not here to spend time with me? Had he come to fight with Melvin?

'What's going on?' I asked Melvin, looking between Chiaz's angered stance and Melvin's. Neither one of them looks at me. I cannot help the sudden interruption of panic that grips my heart, squeezing it painfully.

'Can we discuss this later?' Melvin questions impatiently.

Chiaz snorts and Melvin takes a deep, calming breath. 'I already know what you came to say. Message delivered. Consider us warned.'

'Warned?' I whisper, looking at Melvin. Melvin glances down at me for a second with worried eyes, and I think he must have heard the panicked pace of my heart in my chest. 'What are you talking about?'

Chiaz's glare is full of loathing, and Melvin's expression is just as cruel.

Dizziness shakes my frame. I reached for something - anything - to hold me steady but nothing was close enough. Melvin's hand latches onto my arm, holding me upright.

'You didn't tell her?' Chiaz's voice is loud, incredulous. 'What, were you afraid she would take our side? Manipulative.' I miss the rest of the words he says. My rushing of blood is loud in my ears.

'Please drop it, Chiaz.' Melvin's voice is much more level, much more controlled than Chiaz's is. Melvin is good at that.

'Why?'

'Melvin, what don't I know?' I sounded like I was gasping. Melvin does not respond to me. He glares at Chiaz.

'Jake?' I turn to Chiaz, desperate for answers.

Chiaz raises an eyebrow at me, smug. 'He did not tell you that his brother crossed the line last night?' he asks, his tone thick with sarcasm and pride. Chiaz turns his eyes from me to Melvin.

'Let's not forget what you did.' Melvin hisses.

'What?' My stomach churns. Why, why, why? Why couldn't they just get along?

'Paul was totally justified in -'

'It was no man's land!' Melvin growls at him. His grip tightens on my arm, and I can feel his control slipping again. 'Dejen never crossed the border.'

'Was not!'

'Dejen and Paul?' I whisper. The panic is coursing through me much faster now and I know my heart is not going to relax. Paul was the most volatile of the pack, he was the one who always lost control. 'What happened? Were they fighting? Did Paul get hurt?'

Dejen was just inside with me, joking around. Why hadn't he mentioned any of this to me?

'No one fought.' Melvin says quietly, brushing his hand over my cheek. He turns to Chiaz, seething. 'If you honestly believed the treaty was broken, you would have come with back-up. Go back to your pack of pups while you are ahead.'

'Melvin,'

He looks at me again, his expression softening. 'No one got hurt. Do not panic, please, Lily.'

'You didn't tell her anything, did you?' Chiaz demands angrily.

'Why haven't you told her?'

'Melvin.' His name slips from my lips even though I do not want it to. I sound pathetic. Needy and weak and I hate myself for it.

Melvin presses his hand a bit harder against my skin, reminding me that he is right next to me.

'Leave now.' Melvin's voice is menacing. I am sure I would have fallen if it were not for Melvin's grip on my arm. 'Lily, breathe, love.' He is holding me around my waist, his cold hand cupping my face. 'You're safe here. Nothing happened.'

I cannot seem to keep myself still and I sway uneasily in his arms. I cannot hear anything over the sound of my lungs dragging air through my lips, but it seemed as if there was no air left in the world for me to breathe in at all.

'You don't think Lily has a right to know?' Chiaz snaps, challenging Melvin. 'It's her life.'

Melvin growls at him and the sound brings me closer to the brink of an attack. I could not tell if the shaking beneath me was from my

legs or Melvin. I have never seen Melvin shake - that was usually a wolf trait.

'Why should she panic when she wasn't in any danger, mongrel?'

'Better frightened than lied to.'

'Do you really think frightening her is better than protecting her?' Melvin is barely speaking to Chiaz now. His eyes are only on me as he continues to stroke my cheek, encouraging me to calm down.

'She's tougher than you think, and she's been through worse.'

Abruptly, Melvin's fake calm expression contorts into one of pain. I could not help the way my memories flashed to Jane's ghastly gift being used on Melvin in Volterra and the way his body cringed in agony against the marble tiles.

'Melvin?' I whispered, shocked. He grimaces, hiding a wince, looking back at me.

'It's nothing, Lily.' He murmurs, pressing his lips to my forehead. I shudder under his touch, remembering that his lips were not the only ones to touch my skin. 'Chiaz just has a good memory, that's all.'

'Chiaz, that's enough.' I snapped at him, braver than I could imagine. Chiaz shrugs, though his grin never falters.

'The treaty stands until your leeches break it.'

'We wouldn't dare, Chiaz.' Melchor's smooth voice is so close that I jump. I was not sure when he had come.

'Sam said to keep off our land.' Chiaz says finally, his voice hard.

'Keep off ours.' Melvin retorts, just as harsh. Chiaz turns, without another word or glance, and disappears into the forest.

'Lily,' Melvin turns towards me now, his expression concerned.

'What did you keep from me?' I demanded, wanting my voice to be strong, but it was pathetically weak.

'Don't worry about it, Lily, please.' Melvin begs, brushing my cheeks. I did not realize I had started crying.

'Tell her, Melvin.' Vivian's voice is sharp behind me, and I turn, shocked by her sudden presence. Vivian was always gone, which was entirely normal for her. She did not like me before the attack and there was no reason for her to like me now.

I twisted my head around, trying to see who else had come that I did not know of. It was just Vivian and Melchor.

'She's not well.' Melvin responds.

Vivian offers me a look that I am not sure how to process - not anger or hatred, but nothing remotely warm either. 'She deserves to know.'

Melvin sighs, pressing the bridge of his nose. 'She's on the verge of having a panic attack, Vivian, now is not the best time.'

'We tracked a scent, Lily.' Vivian says, defiantly. Her voice is cool and level. 'It's not the one from your room, but it was one none of us recognized and it was near your house.' I shudder beneath Melvin's hands as Vivian mentions my home. 'We chased the scent and found the vampire, but they were playing with the boundary line like they were reading it from a map. The mutts thought Dejen crossed the line and they reacted defensively, and so we did, too.'

Her voice is calm, even. I listen to her every word, hanging onto it to keep my panic at bay.

'That's all that happened.' She tells me with a small nod. 'No fights, no one got hurt. The mutts have been overly sensitive for no reason, but I am sure it will fade with time.'

I feel relieved, feeling the Earth steady around me.

'See, Lily, nothing to worry about.' Vivian offers me a small smile, and I am so relieved that I return it.

Nothing happened. There was no fight with the wolves. No one was hurt. Not Dejen, not Paul, not the vampire they were after. I could feel the blood draining out of my face and the edges of my vision slowly going dark.



'You're tracking him?'

I cannot wait for Melvin to come to me. I cannot wait for your coven leader to find me. His words play like a broken record. His voice scratched and repeated. Replaying words, I have already heard a thousand times in my dreams, in my memories, in my panic when Melvin touches me the wrong way.

I am thankful, then, for Melvin holding me up because I cannot feel my legs.

I am so excited to meet your coven, Lily. I need them to come after me.

I am aware of the soft touches of someone's fingers in my hair before anything else. Then, quiet murmuring around me before the voices become clearer. Melvin's upset and panicked tone against Melchor's soft and calm one. Naddalin Natalie reassures everyone with words I cannot make out, and Dejen swears he will give him what he deserves.

'You can't!' My voice seems muffled by something, but my eyes flash open and I am staring into the eyes of Melvin.

## 25 Visitations

I felt like it was too early again when I woke up, and I knew I was getting the schedule of my days and nights slowly reversed. I lay in

my bed and listened to the quiet voices of Naddalin Natalie and Jae in the other room. That they were loud enough for me to hear it at all was odd. I rolled until my feet touched the ground, then staggered into the living room.

The clock on the TV said it was just after two in the morning. Naddalin Natalie and Jae were sitting together on the couch, Naddalin Natalie sketching again as Jae looked over her shoulder. They did not raise their voices when I entered, too absorbed in Naddalin Natalie's work. I slipped over to Jae's side to have a look. Did she see anything more?

I asked him quietly. Yes. Something pulled him back into the room with the VCR, but it is light now. I watched Naddalin Natalie draw a square room with dark beams on its low ceiling. The walls were paneled in wood, a bit too dark, outdated. The floor had a dark carpet with a pattern on it. There was a large window against the south wall, and an opening through the west wall led to the living room. One side of this entrance was stone - a large bronze stone fireplace that was open to both rooms.

The focus of the room from this vantage point, the TV and VCR, balanced on an undersized wooden stand, was in the southwest corner of the room. A curved aged sectional sofa in front of the TV, a round coffee table in front of it. The phone goes,' I whispered, pointing. Two pairs of eternal eyes stared at me. This is my mother's house.

Naddalin Natalie was already off the couch, phone in hand, dialing. I looked at the accurate rendering of my mother's family room. Unusually, Jae moved closer to me. He lightly touched his hand to my shoulder, and the physical contact made his calming influence stronger. The panic remained deaf, blurred. Naddalin Natalie's lips trembled from the speed of her words; the low hum impossible to decipher. I could not concentrate. Lily,' Naddalin Natalie said.

I looked at her numbly. Lily, Melvin is coming to get you. He, Dejen, and Melchor are going to take you somewhere, to hide you for a while. Melvin is coming? The words were like a life jacket, holding my head above the deluge. Yes, it catches the first flight out of Altoona. We will meet him at the trains station, and you will go with him. But my mother... he came here for my mother, Naddalin Natalie! Despite Jae, hysteria built up in my voice. Jae and I will stay until she is safe. I cannot win, Naddalin Natalie. You cannot keep everyone I know forever. Can't you see what he is doing? He does not follow me at all. He will find someone, he will hurt someone I love...Naddalin Natalie, I cannot - 'We'll catch him, Lily,' she assured me.

What if you get hurt, Naddalin Natalie? Do you think this suits me? Do you think it is only my human family that he can hurt me with? Naddalin Natalie looked at Jae with a meaningful eye. A deep, heavy fog

of lethargy came over me, and my eyes closed without my permission. My mind struggled against the fog, realizing what was happening. I opened my eyes and stood up, stepping away from Jae's hand. I do not want to go back to sleep,' I snapped. I walked to my room and shut the door, really slammed it, so I could be free to go to pieces privately. This time Naddalin Natalie did not follow me. For three and a half hours, I stared at the wall, curled up in a ball, walking around. My mind raced, trying to find a way out of this nightmare. There was no escape, no reprieve. I could only see one ending looming darkly in my future. The only question was how many other people would be hurt before I reached it. The only comfort, the only hope I had left, was knowing that I would see Melvin soon.

Maybe if I could just see his face again, I could also see the solution that has eluded me now. When the phone rang, I returned to the front room, a little ashamed of my behavior. I hoped I had not offended either of them, that they would know how grateful I was for the sacrifices they were making on my behalf.

Naddalin Natalie was talking as fast as ever, but what caught my attention was that, for the first time, Jae was not in the room. I looked at the clock - it was five-thirty in the morning. They are just getting on their plane,' Naddalin Natalie told me. 'They will land at nine-forty-five. Just a few more hours to keep breathing until he is here. Where is Jae? He

went to check. You are not staying here? No, we are moving closer to your mother's house. My stomach twisted with worry at his words. But the phone rang again, distracting me. She looked surprised, but I was already walking forward, hopefully reaching for the phone. Hello? asked Naddalin Natalie. 'No, she is here. She held the phone for me.

Your mother, she put her mouth. Hello?' 'Lily? Lily? I was walking away from his sight in a crowded place. It was the sound of panic. I sighed. I expected this, although I tried to make my message as unarmored as possible without diminishing the sound of it. 'Emergency. Calm down, Mom,' I said in my most soothing voice, gently pulling away from Naddalin Natalie. I was not sure I could lie so convincingly with her eyes on me.' I am fine, okay? Just give me a minute and I will explain everything, I promise. I stopped, surprised that she had not interrupted me yet. Mom?'

Be incredibly careful not to say anything until I tell you. The voice I heard now was as unknown as it was unexpected. It was a male tenor voice, a very pleasant generic voice - the kind of voice you have heard in the background of luxury car commercials. He spoke very quickly. Now, I do not need to hurt your mother, so please do exactly as I say, and she will be fine. He paused for a minute while I listened in mute horror. 'It's very good,' he congratulated. 'Now repeat after me and try to

sound natural. Please say, 'No, mom, stay where you are.' No, mom, stay where you are.

My voice was barely more than a whisper. I can see this is going to be difficult. The voice was amused, still light and friendly. 'Why don't you go into another room now, so your face doesn't ruin everything?' There is no reason for your mother to suffer. As you walk, please say, 'Mom, please listen to me. » Say it now. Mom, please listen to me,' my voice pleaded.

I walked very slowly towards the bedroom, feeling Naddalin Natalie's worried gaze on my back. I closed the door behind me, trying to think clearly about the terror that gripped my brain. Right now, are you alone? Simply answer yes or no. Yes.' 'But they can still hear you, I am sure. Yes.' 'Okay, then,' the pleasant voice continued, 'say, 'Mom, trust me.' 'Mom, trust me. It worked a little better than I expected. I was prepared to wait, but your mother arrived earlier than expected. It is easier that way, isn't it? Less suspense, less anxiety for you. I waited. Now, I want you to listen closely. I am going to need you to keep you away from your friends; do you think you can do it? Answer yes or no. No. I am sorry to hear that. I was hoping you would be a little more creative than that. Do you think you could walk away from them if your mother's life depended on it? Answer yes or no. Somehow, there had to be a way. I remembered

we were going to the trains station. Sky Harbor International Airport: crowded, confusingly laid out...' Yeah.' 'It is better. I am sure it will not be easy, but if I get the slightest glimmer that you have a business, well, that would be bad for your mother,' the friendly voice promised. 'You must know enough about us by now to realize how quickly I would know if you tried to bring someone with you. And how long would I need to deal with your mother if that were the case? Do you understand? Answer yes or no. Yes. My voice broke. All right, Lily.

Now, this is what you need to do. I want you to go to your mother's. Next to the phone, there will be a number. Call him, and I will tell you where to go from there. I already knew where I would go, and where it would end. But I would follow his instructions exactly. 'Can you do this? Answer yes or no. Yes.' 'Before noon, please, Lily. I do not have all day,' he said politely. Where's Phil? I asked laconically. Ah, be careful now, Lily. asks you to speak, please. I have been waiting. It is important now that you do not make your friends suspicious when you return to them. Tell them your mother called and you told her not to go home just yet. Now repeat after me, 'Thank you, mum.' Say it now. Thank you, mum. The tears were coming. I tried to push them back. Say, 'I love, mom, I will see you soon.' Say it now.

I love you, Mom. My voice was thick. 'I'll see you soon,' I promised. 'Goodbye, Lily. I cannot wait to see you again. He hung up. I held the phone to my ear. My joints were frozen with terror - I could not undo my fingers to drop them. I knew I had to think, but my head was filled with the sound of my mother's panic. Seconds ticked by as I fought for control. Slowly, slowly, my thoughts began to shatter beyond this brick wall of pain. To plan. For I had no choice now but one: go into the mirrored room and die. I had no guarantees, nothing to give to keep my mother alive. I could only hope that Pierre would be satisfied to win the match, that beating Melvin would be enough. Desperation grabbed it; there was no way to negotiate, nothing I could offer or withhold that could sway him. But I still had no choice. I had to try. I fought back the terror as best I could. My decision has been made. There is no point in wasting time agonizing over the outcome. I had to think because Naddalin Natalie and Jae were waiting for me, and avoiding them was essential, and impossible. I was suddenly grateful that Jae was gone.

If he had been here to feel my anguish in the last five minutes, how could I have stopped them from being suspicious? I stifled the fear, the anxiety, I tried to stifle it. I could not afford it now. I did not know when he would return. I focused on my escape. I had to hope that my familiarity with the trains station would turn the odds in my favor.



Somehow, I had to keep Naddalin Natalie away...I knew Naddalin Natalie was in the other room waiting for me, curious. But I had to deal with something else in private before Jae got back. I had to accept that I would not see Melvin again, not even a last glimpse of his face to take with me to the hall of mirrors. I was going to hurt her, and I could not say goodbye to her. I let the waves of torture wash over me and have their way for a while. Then I pushed them away, too, wanting to face Naddalin Natalie. The only expression I could manage was a dull, dead stare. I saw her alarm and did not wait for her to ask. I only had one script and I would never manage improvisation now. My mother was worried, she wanted to go home. But that is okay, I convinced her to stay away. My voice was lifeless. We will make sure she is okay, Lily, do not worry. I turned away; I could not let her see my face. My eye fell on a blank page of hotel stationery on the desk. I took it slowly, a plan forming. There was also an envelope there. It was good. Naddalin Natalie, I asked slowly, without turning around, keeping my voice level. 'If I write a letter to my mother, would you give it to her? Leave it at home, I mean. Of course, Lily.

His voice was cautious. She could see me coming apart at the seams. I had to keep my emotions under better control. I returned to the bedroom and knelt beside the small bedside table to write. Melvin,' I wrote. My hand was shaking, the letters were barely legible. I like you. I

am sorry. He has my mother, and I must try. I know that might not work. I am deeply sorry. Do not be mad at Naddalin Natalie and Jae. If I walk away from them, it will be a miracle. Tell them to thank you for me. Naddalin Natalie, please. And please, please do not come after him. That is what he wants. I think.

I cannot stand it if someone must get hurt because of me, especially you. Please, that is the only thing I can ask of you right now. For me. I like you. Forgive me. Lily carefully folded the letter and sealed it in the envelope. He would eventually find it. I only hoped he would understand and listen to me once. And then I carefully sealed my heart.

## 26 Disguise

had taken a lot less time than I thought - all the terror, the despair, the bursting of my heart. Minutes passed more slowly than usual. Jae still had not returned when I returned to Naddalin Natalie. I was afraid of being in the same room as her, afraid of her guessing... and afraid of hiding from her for the same reason. I would have thought I was way beyond being surprised, my thoughts tortured and unsteady, but I was startled when I saw Naddalin Natalie bent over the desk, gripping the edge with both hands. Naddalin Natalie? She did not react when I called her name, but her head was slowly rocking from side to side, and I saw her

face. His eyes were blank, dazed... My thoughts flew to my mother. Was I already too late? I rushed to his side, automatically reaching out to touch his hand. Naddalin Natalie! Jae's voice whipped, and then he was right behind her, his hands wrapping around hers, loosening them from their grip on the table. On the other side of the room, the door closed with a faint click. What is that? he asked. She turned her face away from me, into her chest.

'Lily,' she said. 'I am here,' I replied. His head was writhing, his eyes locking on mine, their expression still oddly empty. I immediately realized that she had not spoken to me, she had answered Jae's question. What did you see? I said - and there was no doubt in my flat, callous voice. Jae looked at me sharply. I kept my expression blank and waited. Her eyes were confused as they flickered rapidly between Naddalin Natalie's face and mine, sensing the chaos...for I could guess what Naddalin Natalie had seen now. A quiet atmosphere settles around me. I welcomed it, using it to keep my emotions disciplined, and in check. Naddalin Natalie, too, has recovered. Nothing, really,' she finally replied, her voice remarkably calm and convincing. 'Just the same room as before. She finally looked at me, her expression smooth and withdrawn. 'Did you want breakfast?'

No, I am going to eat at the trains station. I was very calm too. I went to the bathroom to take a shower. As if I were borrowing Jae's weird extra sense, I could sense Naddalin Natalie's wild - albeit well-hidden - desperation to get me out of the room, to be alone with Jae. So, she could tell him that they were doing something wrong, that they were going to fail... I prepared myself methodically, concentrating on every little task. I let my hair down, swirling around me, covering my face. The peaceful vibe Jae created went through me and helped me think clearly. Helped me plan. I dug in my bag until I found my sock full of money. I emptied it into my pocket. I was eager to get to the trains station, and happy when we left by seven. I sat alone this time in the back of the dark car. Naddalin Natalie leaned against the door, her face towards Jae but, behind her sunglasses, glanced in my direction every few seconds. Naddalin Natalie? I asked indifferently. She was suspicious. 'Yes?'

'How does that work? The things you, see? I looked out the side window, and my voice was boring. 'Melvin said it was not final...that are things changing? It was harder than I thought to say his name. That is what must have alerted Jae, why a new wave of serenity filled the car. Yes, things are changing... she whispered - hopefully, I thought. 'Some things are more certain than others...like the weather. People are tougher. I only see the course they are on while they are at it.' Once they change their

minds - make a new decision, no matter how small - the whole future changes. I nodded thoughtfully. 'So, you couldn't see Pierre in Phoenix until you decided to come here.' Yes,' she agreed, suspicious again. And she had not seen me in the hall of mirrors with Pierre until I decided to meet him there. I tried not to think about what else she could have seen. I did not want my panic to make Jae more suspicious. They would be watching me twice as carefully now, anyway, after Naddalin Natalie's vision. It was going to be impossible. We arrived at the trains station. Luck was with me, or it was simply good luck. Melvin's plane landed in Terminal Four, the largest terminal, where most flights landed - so it was no surprise that he did. But it was the terminal I needed: the biggest, the most confusing. And there was a door on level three that might have been the only chance.

We parked on the fourth floor of the huge garage. I led the way, for once more knowledgeable about my surroundings than they were. We descended the elevator to level three, where the passengers unloaded. Naddalin Natalie and Jae spent a lot of time looking at the departing flight board. I could hear them discussing the pros and cons of New York, Atlanta, and Texas. Places I had never seen. And would never see. I waited for my opportunity, impatient, unable to keep my toe from tapping. We sat in the long rows of chairs by the metal detectors, Jae and Naddalin

Natalie pretending to be people watching but watching me. Every inch I moved in my seat was followed by a glance out of the corner of their eyes. It was hopeless. Should I run? Would they dare physically arrest me in this public place? Or would they just follow? I took the unmarked envelope out of my pocket and placed it in Naddalin Natalie's black leather bag. She looked at me. My letter,' I said.

She nodded, tucking it under the top flap. He would find it soon enough. Minutes passed and Melvin's arrival drew closer. It was amazing how every cell in my body seemed to know he was coming, to yearn for his coming. This made things exceedingly difficult. I found myself trying to think of excuses to stay, to see him first, and then make my escape. But I knew it was impossible if I was going to have a chance to escape. Several times Naddalin Natalie offered to have breakfast with me. Later, I told him, not yet. I looked at the arrival board, watching the flight after the flight arrived on time.

The flight from Altoona crept closer to the top of the board. And then, when I only had thirty minutes to escape, the numbers changed. His plane was ten minutes early. I had no more time. I am going to eat now,' I said quickly. Naddalin Natalie stood up. 'I will come with you. Do you mind if Jae comes instead? I asked. 'I feel a little...' I did not finish the sentence.

My eyes were wild enough to convey what I did not say. Jae stood up. Naddalin Natalie's eyes were confused, but - I saw to my relief - not suspicious. She must attribute the change in her vision to a move by the tracker rather than betrayal on my part. Jae walked silently beside me, his hand on the little one on my back, as if guiding me. I pretended to have a lack of interest in the first cafes at the trains station, my head searching for what I wanted. And there it was, around the corner, out of Naddalin Natalie's sight: the restroom on level three. Does that bother you? I asked Jae casually. 'I will just be for a while. 'I will be here,' he said. As soon as the door closed behind me, I ran. I remembered the time I got lost in that bathroom because there were two exits. Outside the far door, it was only a short sprint to the elevators, and if Jae stayed where he said he would, I would never be in his sights.

I did not look behind me as I ran. It was my only chance, and even if he saw me, I had to keep going. People looked, but I ignored them. Around the corner, the elevators were waiting, and I rushed forward, throwing my hand between the closing doors of a full elevator headed down. I squeezed in next to the irritated passengers and checked to make sure the level one button had been pressed. It was already on, and the doors closed. As soon as the door opened, I was off again, to the sound of annoying whispers behind me. I slowed down as I passed the security

guards by the baggage carousels, only to start again when the exit doors came into view. I had no way of knowing if Jae was still looking for me. I would only have a few seconds if he followed my scent.

I jumped through the automatic doors, almost banging into the glass when they opened too slowly. Along the crowded sidewalk, there was no cab in sight. I did not have the time. Naddalin Natalie and Jae were about to realize I was gone, or they already had. They found me in a heartbeat. A shuttle to the Hyatt was closing a few feet behind me. Wait! I called, running, greeting the driver. It is the shuttle to the Hyatt,' the driver said in confusion as he opened the doors. Yes, I breathed, that is where I am going. I rushed up the stairs. He looked kindly at my condition without luggage, but then shrugged, not caring enough to ask. Most of the seats were empty.

I sat as far away from other travelers as possible and watched out the window as first the sidewalk, then the trains station rolled away. I could not help but imagine Melvin, where he would be standing by the side of the road when he found the end of my trail. I could not cry yet, I told myself. I still had a long way to go. My luck held. In front of the Hyatt, a tired-looking couple was pulling their last suitcase out of the trunk of a taxi. I jumped off the shuttle and ran for the cabin, sliding into the seat behind the driver. The tired couple and the shuttle driver looked at



me. I told the surprised taxi driver my mother's address. 'I need to get there as soon as possible.

'It's in Scottsdale,' he complained. I threw eighty over the seat. Will this be enough? Of course, kid, no problem. I sat back in the seat, crossing my arms in my lap. The familiar city began to rush around me, but I did not look out the windows. I tried to stay in control. I was determined not to get lost at this point now that my plan was completed. There was no point in indulging in more terror, more anxiety. My path was marked out. I just had to follow him now.

So, instead of panicking, I closed my eyes and spent the twenty-minute drive with Melvin. I imagined that I had stayed at the train station to meet Melvin. I visualized how I would stand on my toes, the sooner to see his face. How fast, how elegantly he moved through the crowds of people that separated us. And then I would run to close those last feet between us - reckless as always - and I would be in his marble arms, safe at last. I wondered where we would have gone. North somewhere, so he could be out in the day. Or somewhere far away, so we can lie in the sun together again. I imagined him at the edge of the shore, his skin sparkling like the sea. No matter how long we had to hide. Being trapped in a hotel room with him would be heaven. So many questions I still had for him. I could talk to him forever, never sleep, never leave his

side. I could see his face so clearly now...almost hear his voice. And, despite all the horror and despair, I was fleetingly happy. I was so involved in my escapist daydreams; I lost track of race seconds. Hey, what was the number? The taxi driver's question pierced my fantasy, letting all the colors run out of my beautiful illusions. Fear, dark and harsh, was waiting to fill the space they left behind. Fifty-eight twenty-one. My voice sounded strangled. The taxi driver looked at me, nervous that I had an episode or something. So here we are. He was eager to get me out of his car, hoping I would not ask for change.

Thanks,' I whispered. There was no need to be afraid, I reminded myself. The house was empty. I had to hurry; my mother was waiting for me, scared, depended on me. I ran for the door, reaching automatically to grab the key under the eaves. I unlocked the door. It was dark inside, empty, normal. I ran to the phone, turning on the kitchen light on my way. There on the whiteboard was a ten-digit number written in a neat little hand. My fingers fell on the keyboard, making mistakes. I had to hang up and start over. I focused only on the buttons this time, carefully pressing each one in turn. I succeeded. I held the phone to my ear with a shaky hand. He only rang once. Hello Lily answered that easy voice. 'It was very quick. I am impressed. Is my mother, okay?

She is perfectly fine. Do not worry, Lily, I do not fight with her. Unless you came alone, of course. Lighthearted, fun. I am alone. I had never been so alone in my entire life. Particularly good. Now, do you know the ballet studio just around the corner from your house?' Yes. I know how to get there. Well, then, I will see you soon. I hung. I ran from the room, through the door, into the baking heat. There was no time to look back at my house, and I did not want to see it as it was now - empty, a symbol of fear instead of a sanctuary. The last person to walk into these familiar rooms was my enemy. Out of the corner of my eye, I could almost see my mother standing in the shade of the tall eucalyptus tree where I had played as a child. Or kneeling in front of the small plot of land around the mailbox, the graveyard of all the flowers she had tried to grow.

The memories were better than any reality I would see today. But I ran away from them, towards the corner, leaving everything behind. I felt so slow, like I was running through wet sand - I could not seem to get enough buy from the concrete. I tripped several times, once falling, catching myself with my hands, scraping them on the pavement, then rushing to dive forward again. But anyway, I am done around the corner. Just another street now; I ran, sweat running down my face, panting. The sun was hot on my skin, too bright as it bounced off the white concrete and blinded me. I felt dangerously exposed. More fiercely than I could

have imagined, I wished for the green, protective forests of McAuley...of home. When I rounded the last corner, on Cactus, I could see the studio, looking like I remembered it. The parking lot out front was empty, vertical blinds in all the windows drawn. I could not run anymore - I could not breathe anymore; effort and fear had gotten the best of me. I thought of my mother keeping my feet moving, one in front of the other. As I approached, I could see the panel inside the door. It was handwritten on bright pink paper; he said the dance studio was closed for spring break. I touched the handle and pulled it carefully. It has been unlocked. I fought to catch my breath and opened the door. The lobby was dark and empty, cool, the air conditioner thrumming. Plastic molded chairs were stacked along the walls and the carpet smelled of shampoo. The west dance floor was dark, I could see through the open observation window. The eastern dance floor, the largest room, was lit. But the blinds were closed on the window. Terror gripped me so strongly that I was trapped by it.

I could not move my feet. And then my mother's voice called. Lily? Lily? That same tone of hysterical panic. I sprinted for the door at the sound of his voice. Lily, you scared me! Do not you ever do this to me again! His voice continued as I ran into the long, high-ceilinged room. I looked around, trying to find where his voice was coming from. I heard her laugh, and I whirled at the sound. There she was, on the television

screen, ruffling my hair in high relief. It was Thanksgiving, and I was twelve. We went to see my grandmother in California the last year before she died. We went to the beach one day, and I had leaned too far over the edge of the pier. She had seen my feet thrashing, trying to regain my balance. 'Lily? Lily? she had called me out of fear. And then the TV screen was blue. I turned around slowly. He was standing very still near the back exit, so I still did not notice him at first. In his hand was a remote control. We looked at each other for a long moment, then he smiled. He walked towards me, close, then passed me to put the remote control next to the VCR.

I turned carefully to look at him. Sorry about that, Lily, but isn't it better that your mother did not have to be involved in any of this? His voice was courteous and kind. And suddenly it hit me. My mother was safe. She was still in California. She had never understood my message. She had never been terrified by the dark red eyes in the abnormally pale face in front of me. She was safe. 'Yes,' I replied, my voice saturated with relief. You do not seem mad that I cheated on you. I am not. My sudden euphoria made me brave. What did it matter now? It would soon be over.

Charlie and Mom would never be hurt, never have to fear. I felt almost dizzy. An analytical part of my mind warned me that I was dangerously close to breaking stress. It is strange. You mean it. His dark

eyes surveyed me with interest. The irises were almost black, with just a hint of ruby at the edges. Thirst. 'I'm going to give your strange coven so much; you humans can be very interesting.' I guess I can see the appeal of watching you. It is amazing - some of you seem to have no sense of self-interest at all. He was standing a few feet away from me, arms crossed, looking at me curiously.

There was no threat in his face or his stance. He looked so average, nothing remarkable about his face or body at all. Just the pale skin, circled eyes that I had become so used to. He wore a pale blue long-sleeved shirt and faded blue jeans. You are going to tell me your boyfriend's going to get revenge? he asked, I hope that sounded like me. No, I do not think so. At least I asked him not to. And what was his response to that? I do not know. It was oddly easy to converse with this genteel hunter. 'I left him a letter. How romantic, one last letter. And do you think he will honor it? His voice was just a little harsher now, a hint of sarcasm that marred his polite tone. I hope. Hmmm. Well, our hopes differ then. You see, it was all just a little too easy, too fast. To be completely honest, I am disappointed. I expected a much bigger challenge. And I only needed a little luck. I waited in silence. When Victoria could not reach your father, I asked her to find out more about you. There was no sense running around the planet chasing you when I could comfortably wait for

you in a location of my choosing. So, after talking to Victoria, I decided to come to Phoenix to visit your mother. I heard you say you were going home. At first, I never dreamed that you wanted it. But then I wondered. Humans can be very predictable; they like to be somewhere familiar, somewhere safe. And wouldn't that be the perfect ploy, to go to the last place you should be when hiding - the place you said you would be? But of course, I was not sure, it was just a hunch. I am used to having a feeling about the prey I am hunting, a sixth sense if you will. I listened to your message when I arrived at your mother's house, but of course, I could not be sure where you called from. It was extremely helpful to have your number, but you could have been in Antarctica for all I knew, and the game would not work unless you were nearby. Then your boyfriend got on a plane to Phoenix.

Victoria watched them for me, of course; in a game with so many players, I could not work alone. And so, they told me what I had hoped for, that you were here after all. I was ready; I had already browsed your charming films at home. And then it was just a matter of bluffing. Extremely easy, you know, not up to my standards. So, you see, I hope you are wrong about your boyfriend. Melvin, right? I did not answer. The bravado increased.

He was coming to the end of his gloat. It was not for me anyway. There was no glory in beating me, a weak human. Would you mind very much if I left a little letter of my own for your Melvin? He stepped back and touched a palm-sized digital video camera carefully balanced above the stereo. A small red light indicated that it was already working. He adjusted it several times and expanded the frame. I looked at him in horror. I am sorry, but I do not think he will be able to resist chasing me after he watches this. And I would not want anything missing. That was all for him, of course. You are simply a human, who was unfortunately in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and running with the wrong crowd, I might add. He walked over to me, smiling.

'Before we start...' I felt a nauseous loop in the pit of my stomach as he spoke. It was something I had not expected. I just want to rub it, just a little. The answer was there all along, and I was so scared that Melvin would see this and ruin my fun. It happened once, oh, centuries ago. The only time my prey escaped me. You see, the vampire who so foolishly loved this little victim made the choice your Melvin was too weak to make. When the elder found out I was after his girlfriend, he stole her from the asylum where he worked - I will never understand the obsession some vampires seem to form with you humans - and as soon as he freed her, he made her safe.



She did not even seem to notice the pain, poor little creature. She had been stuck in this black hole of a cell for so long. A hundred years ago and she would have been burned at the stake for her visions. In the 1980s, it was an asylum and shock treatment. When she opened her eyes, strong in her fresh youth, it was as if she had never seen the sun before. The old vampire made her into a strong new vampire, and there was no reason for me to touch her then. He sighed. 'I destroyed the old one for revenge. Naddalin Natalie, I breathed in amazement. Yes, your boyfriend. I was surprised to see her in the clearing. So, I guess his coven should be able to take some solace from this experience. I understand you, but they get it. The only victim that eluded me, quite an honor, in fact. And she smelled so delicious. I still regret never having had a taste... She smelled even better than you. Sorry - I do not mean to be offensive. You have a genuinely nice smell. Floral, sort of...' He took another step toward me until he was inches away. He lifted a strand of my hair and sniffed it gently. Then he gently patted the strand in place, and I felt the tips of his cool fingers against my throat. He got up to stroke my cheek once quickly with his thumb, his face curious. I wanted to run so badly, but I was frozen. I could not even flinch. "No," he muttered dropping his hand, "I don't understand." He sighed. 'Well, I guess we should move on. And then I can

call your friends and tell them where to find you, and my little message. I am sick now. There was pain coming, I could see it in his eyes.

It would not be enough for him to win, and feed, and There would be no quick end like I had counted on. My knees started to shake, and I was afraid I was going to fall. He backed up and started to pace around, casually, as if trying to get a better view of a statue in a museum. His face was still open and friendly as he decided where to start. Then he sagged forward, into a crouch I recognized, and his pleasant smile slowly widened, grew, until it was not a smile at all, but a contortion of teeth, exposed and shimmering. I could not help myself, I tried to run. As useless as I knew it would be, as weak as my knees already were, panic took over and I bolted for the escape door.

He was in front of me in a flash. I did not see if he was using his hand or his foot, it was too fast. A crushing blow hit my chest - I felt myself fly backward, then heard the crack as my head banged into the mirrors.

The glass warped, some of the pieces shattering and shattering on the floor next to me. I was too stunned to feel pain. I could not breathe yet. He slowly walked toward me. It is a genuinely nice effect,' he said, surveying the mess of the glass, his friendly voice again. 'I thought this piece would be visually dramatic for my little film. That is why I chose

this place to meet you. It is perfect, isn't it? I ignored him, jostling on my hands and knees, crawling toward the other door. He was on top of me right away, his foot dropping hard on my leg. I heard the sickening snap before I felt it. But then I felt it, and I could not hold back my cry of agony.

I twisted to reach my leg, and he stood over me, smiling. Do you want to rethink your last request? he asked pleasantly. His toe nudged my broken leg, and I heard a piercing scream. With shock, I realized it was mine. Wouldn't you rather Melvin tries to find me? he asked. Nope! I chewed. 'No, Melvin, don't-' And then something shattered in my face, throwing me into the shattered mirrors. Above the pain in my leg, I felt the sharp tear through my scalp where the glass cut into it.

-And-

Then the hot humidity started to shoot through my hair with alarming speed. I could feel it soaking the shoulder of my shirt and hear it dripping onto the wood below.

The smell of it twisted my stomach. Through nausea and dizziness, I saw something that gave me a sudden and final shred of hope. His eyes, previously merely intentional, now burned with uncontrollable need. The blood - spilling crimson over my white shirt, pooling rapidly on the floor - was driving him mad with thirst. No matter his original

intentions, he could not pull this off for much longer. That it was quick now was all I could hope for as the flow of blood from my head sucked my consciousness away with it. My eyes were closing. I heard as if underwater, the final growl of the hunter. I could see, through the long tunnels, my eyes had become, his dark form coming towards me. With my last effort, my hand instinctively raised to protect my face. My eyes closed, and I drifted.

## 27 Fallen Phantoms

I drifted, I dreamed. Where I floated, beneath the dark waters, I heard the happiest sound my mind could conjure up - as beautiful, as uplifting as it was ghastly. It was another growl; A deeper, wilder roar, ringing in anger. I was almost brought back to the surface by a sharp pain that slashed my raised hand, but I could not find my way back far enough to open my eyes.

-And-

Then I knew I was dead. For through the heavy waters, I heard an angel calling my name and calling me to the only heaven I wanted. 'Oh no, Lily, no!' the angel's voice cried out in terror.

Behind that longed-for sound was another sound - a terrible commotion that my mind shied away from. A vicious bass growl, a

shocking snap, and a high-pitched sharpening sound that suddenly cuts out... I tried to focus on the angel's voice instead.' Lily please! Lily listens to me please Lily please!' He pleaded. Yes, that is what I wanted to say. anything.

~\*~

But I could not find my lips.' Melchor!' the angel cried, agony in his perfect voice. 'Lily, Lily, no, oh please, no, no!' And the angel sobbed tearlessly, broken sobs. The angel should not cry, it was wrong. I tried to find him, to tell him everything was fine, but the water was so deep it was pressing down on me, and I could not breathe. There was a pressure point against my head. It hurts. Then, as that pain broke through the darkness for me, other pains came, greater pains. I screamed, gasped, and burst through the dark pool.

'Lily!' the angel cried. 'She's lost some blood, but the head wound isn't deep,' a calm voice informed me. 'Watch her leg, it's broken.' A howl of anger choked on the angel's lips. I felt a sharp pang in my side. This could not be heaven, could it? There was too much pain for that. 'Some ribs too, I think,' the methodical voice continued. But the sharp pain faded. There was a new pain, a searing pain in my hand that overshadowed everything else. Someone burned me.' Eduard.' I tried to tell him, but my voice was so heavy and slow. I could not understand

myself.' Lily, you will be fine. Can you hear me, Lily? I love you.'

'Melvin,' I tried again.

My voice was a little clearer. 'Yes, I'm here.' 'It hurts,' I whimpered. 'I know, Lily, I know,' - and then, away from me, worried - 'can't you do anything?' My bag, please... Hold your breath Naddalin Natalie, it will help,' Melchor promised. Naddalin Natalie?' I groaned.' She is here, she knew where to find you.'

'My hand hurts,' I tried to tell him.' I know Melchor will give you something, it will stop.' 'My hand is on fire!' I screamed and finally broke through the last of the darkness, my eyes flared open.

I could not see his face, something dark and warm clouded my eyes. Why couldn't they see the fire and put it out? His voice was startled. 'Lily?' 'The fire! Someone stops the fire!' I screamed as it burned me.' Melchor! Your hand!' 'He bit her.' Melchor's voice was not calm anymore, she was horrified. I heard Melvin catch his breath in horror.' Melvin, you must do it.' It was Naddalin Natalie's voice, close to my head. Cool fingers stroking the wetness in my eyes.' No!' he yelled.' Naddalin Natalie' I moaned.'

There might be a chance,' Melchor said. What?' Melvin begged. 'See if you can suck the venom out. The wound is clean.' As Melchor spoke, I could feel more pressure on my head, something poking

and tugging at my scalp. The pain of it was lost in the pain of the fire.' Will this work?' Naddalin Natalie's voice was strained. 'I don't know,' Melchor said. 'But we must hurry.' Melchor, I...' Melvin hesitated. 'I don't know if I can do that.' There was a pain in his beautiful voice again.'

It is your choice, Melvin, one way or another. I cannot help you. I need to stop this bleeding here if you draw blood from her hand.' I writhed in the grip of fiery torture, the movement making the pain in my leg flare up sickeningly.' Eduard!' I screamed. I realized my eyes were closed again. I opened them, desperate to find his face. And I found him. Finally, I could see his perfect face staring at me, twisted into a mask of indecision and pain.' Naddalin Natalie, get me something to support her leg!' Melchor leaned over me and worked on my head.

'Melvin, you must do it now or it will be too late.' Melvin's face was lined. I watched his eyes when doubt was suddenly replaced by a blazing determination. His jaw clenched. I felt his cool, strong fingers on my burning hand, holding it in place. Then his head bent over it and his cold lips pressed against my skin. At first, the pain was worse. I screamed and slapped the cool hands holding me back. I heard Naddalin Natalie's voice trying to calm me. Something heavy was holding my leg to the ground and Melchor had my head Clamped in the vise of his stone arms.

Then, slowly, my writhing quieted as my hand grew numb.

The fire dulled and concentrated on a smaller and smaller point. I felt like I faded into consciousness as the pain subsided. I was afraid of falling back into the black water for fear of losing him in the dark. 'Melvin,' I tried to say but could not hear my voice. You could hear me.' He is right here, Lily.' Stay, Melvin, stay with me...'I will.' His voice was strained but somehow triumphant. I sighed contentedly. The fire was gone, the other pains blunted by sleepiness seeping through my body.' Is everything out?'

Melchor asked from somewhere far away.' Your blood tastes clean,' Melvin said softly. 'I can taste morphine.' Lily?' Melchor called me. I tried to answer. 'Mm?' 'Is the fire gone?' 'Yeah,' I sighed. 'Thank you, Melvin.' 'I love you,' he replied. 'I know,' I breathed, so tired. I heard my favorite sound in the world: Melvin's chuckle, weak with relief. 'Lily?' Melchor asked again. I frowned; I wanted to sleep. 'What?' 'Where's your mom?' 'In California,' I sighed. 'He tricked me, Melvin. He watched our videos.' The outrage in my voice was pitifully weak.

Whereas that reminded me.' Naddalin Natalie.' I tried to open my eyes. 'Naddalin Natalie, the video - he knew you, Naddalin Natalie, he knew where you came from.' I wanted to speak urgently, but my voice was weak. 'I smell gasoline,' I added, surprised by the haze in my brain. 'It's time to move them,' Melchor said. 'No, I want to sleep,' I complained.



'You can sleep honey, I'll carry you,' Melvin reassured me. And I was in his arms, rocked against his chest - floating, all the pain was gone. 'Sleep now Lily' were the last words I heard.

## 24 DEAD ENDS AND ALL DEAD FRINDS

Eyes opened to a bright, white light. I was in an unknown room, a white room. The wall next to me was covered with long vertical blinds; Above my head, the bright lights dazzled me. I was leaning on a hard, uneven bed - a bed with rails. The pillows were flat and lumpy. Somewhere nearby there was an annoying beeping noise. I hoped that meant I was still alive. Death should not be so unpleasant. My hands were all twisted with transparent tubes, and something was glued over my face, under my nose. I raised my hand to tear it off.' No, you do not.'

And cool fingers caught my hand.' Eduard?' I turned my head slightly, and his exquisite face was just a few inches from mine, his chin resting on the edge of my pillow. I realized again that I was alive, this time with gratitude and exhilaration. 'Oh, Melvin, I'm so sorry!' Shah,' he silenced me. 'Right now, everything is fine.' What happened?' I could not remember clearly, and my mind rebelled against me when I tried to remember.' I was too late. I could have been too late,' he whispered, his voice tormented.' I was so stupid, Melvin.

I thought he had my mother.' He tricked us all.' I must call Charlie and my mother,' the haze made me realize.' Naddalin Natalie called her. Rameauite is here - well, here in the hospital. She is getting something to eat right now.' She is here?' I tried to sit up, but the turning in my head accelerated, and his hand gently pressed me onto the pillows.' She will be back soon,' he promised. 'And you have to stay still.' But what did you tell her?' I panicked. I had no interest in being reassured. My mother was here, and I was recovering from a vampire attack. 'Why did you tell her I was here?' You went down two flights of stairs and fell through a window.' He paused. 'You have to admit it could happen.' I sighed, and it hurt. I stared down at my body under the sheet, the huge lump that was my leg.' How bad am I?' I asked.'

You have a broken leg, four broken ribs, some cracks in your skull, bruises that cover every inch of your skin, and you have lost a lot of blood. They gave you a few transfusions. I did not like it - it made you smell wrong for a while.' That must have been a subtle change for you.' No, I like the way you smell.' How did you do that?' I asked quietly. He knew immediately what I meant.' I am not sure.' He looked away from my amazed eyes, lifted my gauze-wrapped hand from the bed and gently held it in his, carefully so as not to disturb the wire that connected me to one of

the monitors. I waited patiently for the rest. He sighed without returning my gaze.

'It was impossible... to stop,' he whispered. 'Impossible. But I did.' He finally looked up, with half a smile. 'I have to love you.' 'Don't I taste as good as I smell?' I smiled in response. 'That hurt my face.' 'Even better - better than I had imagined.' 'I am sorry,' I apologized. He raised his eyes to the ceiling. 'Of all the things you have to apologize for.' 'What should I apologize for?' 'For taking yourself away from me forever.' 'I am sorry,' I apologized again. 'I know why you did it.' His voice was comforting. 'It was still irrational, of course. You should have waited for me; you should have told me.' 'You would not have let me go.' 'No,' he agreed in a grim tone, 'I wouldn't.' Some very unpleasant memories began to return to me. I trembled and then winced. He was immediately anxious. 'Lily, what's going on?' 'What happened to Pierre?' After I pulled him away from you, Dejen and Jae took care of him.'

There was a strong note of regret in his voice. That confused me. 'I didn't see Dejen and Jae there.' 'They had to leave the room... There was a lot of blood.' 'But you stayed.' 'Yes, I stayed.' 'And Naddalin Natalie and Melchor...' I said in amazement. 'They love you too, you know.' A flash of painful images from the last time I saw Naddalin Natalie reminded me of something. 'Did Naddalin Natalie see the tape?' I asked anxiously.'

Yes.' A new sound darkened his voice, a tone of sheer hatred.' She was always in the dark, so she did not remember it.' I know. She understands now.' His voice was flat, but his face was black with anger. I tried to reach his face with my free hand, but something stopped me. I looked down to see the IV pulling on my hand.' Isgitt.' I winced.' What is it?' he asked anxiously - distracted, but not enough. The desolation did not leave his eyes completely.'

Needles,' I explained, looking away from the one in my hand. I focused on a warped ceiling tile and tried to take a deep breath despite the pain in my ribs.' Fear of a needle,' he murmured under his breath and shook his head. 'Oh, a sadistic vampire who wants to torture her to death, sure, no problem, she runs away to meet him. An IV, on the other hand...' I rolled my eyes. I was pleased to discover that at least this reaction was painless. I decided to change the subject.' Why are you here?' I asked. He stared at me, confused at first and then hurt when he touched his eyes. His brows contracted as he frowned. 'Do you want me to leave?' No!' I protested, horrified by the thought. 'No,' I said, "Why does my mother think you're here?" I need to clarify my story before it comes back.' Oh,' he said, and his forehead smoothed back to marble. 'I came to Phoenix to make sense of it, to convince you to return to McAuley.'

His big eyes were so serious and sincere that I almost believed him myself. 'You agreed to see me, and you drove to the hotel where I stayed with Melchor and Naddalin Natalie - of course I was here with parental supervision,' he added virtuously, 'but you stumbled on the stairs on the way to my room and... Well, you know the rest. However, you do not have to remember any details. They have a good excuse to be a little confused about the intricacies.' I thought about it for a moment. 'There are a few flaws in this story. As if there were no broken windows.'

Not really,' he said. 'Naddalin Natalie had a bit too much fun fabricating evidence. It was all done very convincingly - you could sue the hotel if you wanted. You do not have to worry,' he promised, caressing my cheek with the lightest touches. 'Your only task now is to heal.' I was not so lost in the pain or fog of the medication that I did not respond to his touch. The beeping of the monitor jumped around unpredictably - now he was not the only one who could hear my heart behaving badly.' It is going to be embarrassing,' I murmured to myself. He giggled, and a speculative look caught his eye.

'Hmm, I wonder...' He leaned in slowly; The beeping sound accelerated wildly before his lips even touched me. But when they did, albeit with the gentlest pressure, the beeping stopped altogether. He withdrew abruptly, his anxious expression turned into relief when the

monitor reported the restart of my heart.' I need to be even more careful with you than usual.' He frowned.' I was not done kissing you yet,' I complained. 'Don't let me get there.' He grinned and bent over to press his lips slightly against mine. The monitor was raging. But then his lips were tight. He withdrew.' I heard your mother,' he said, grinning again. Do not leave me,' I shouted, an irrational wave of panic flooded me.

I could not let him go - he could disappear from me again. He read the horror in my eyes for a brief second. 'I'm not going to do it,' he solemnly promised, and then he smiled. 'I'm taking a nap.' He moved from the rigid plastic chair at my side to the turquoise faux leather armchair at the foot of my bed, leaned it all the way back and closed his eyes. He was completely silent.' Do not forget to breathe,' I whispered sarcastically. He took a deep breath, his eyes still closed. I could now hear my mother. She was talking to someone, a nurse, and she sounded tired and upset. I wanted to jump out of bed and run to her to calm her down, to promise that everything was fine. But I was not jumping in any form, so I waited impatiently. The door opened a crack, and it peered through.' Mom!' I whispered, my voice full of love and relief. She picked up Melvin's stand on the deck chair and walked to my bed on tiptoe.' He never leaves, does he?'

She murmured. ' Mom, I am so glad to see you!' She bent down to gently embrace me, and warm tears fell on my cheeks.' Lily, I was so upset!' I am sorry, Mom. But now everything is fine, it is okay,' I comforted her.' I am only glad that your eyes are finally opened.' She was sitting on the edge of my bed. I suddenly realized that I had no idea when it was. 'How long have they been closed?' It is Friday, honorable, you have been out for a while.' Friday?' I was shocked. I tried to remember what day it had been, when... but I did not want to think about that.' They had to sedate you for a while, honey - you have a lot of injuries.' I know.' I could feel them.' You are lucky that Dr. Shezor was there. He is such a nice man... Incredibly young, however. And he looks more like a model than a doctor...'

'You met Melchor?' And Melvin's sister Naddalin Natalie. She is a lovely girl.' She is,' I agreed with all my heart. She looked over her shoulder at Melvin, who was lying on the chair with his eyes closed. 'You didn't tell me you have such good friends in McAuley.' I winced and then moaned.' What hurts?' she asked anxiously and turned to me. Melvin's eyes flashed on my face.' It is fine,' I assured them. 'I just have to remember not to move.' He fell back into his false sleep. I used my mother's momentary distraction to prevent the subject from returning to my less than open behavior. 'Where is Phil?' I asked quickly.' California -

oh, Lily! You will never guess! Just as we were about to leave, the best news!' Deann was signed?' I guessed.' Yes! How did you guess it? The suns, can you believe it?' That is great, Mom,' I said as enthusiastically as I could do it, even though I had little idea what that meant.' And you are going to like Los Altos Hills so much,' she enthused as I stared at her emptiness.

'I was a bit worried when Deann started talking about Akron, what about the snow and everything, because you know how I hate the cold, but now Los Altos Hills! It is always sunny, and the humidity really is not that bad. We found the cutest house, yellow, with white rims and a porch like in an old movie, and this huge oak, and it is just a few minutes from the sea, and you will have your own bathroom - 'Wait, mom!' I interrupted. Melvin still had his eyes closed, but he looked too tense to pass as sleep. 'What are you talking about? I am not going to California. I live in McAuley.'

'But you don't have to, silly anymore,' she laughed. 'Deann will now be able to be there so much more... We have talked a lot about it, and what I am going to do is swap the away games, half the time with you, half the time with him.' Mom.' I hesitated and wondered how best to proceed diplomatically. 'I want to live in McAuley. I have already settled in at school and have a few girlfriends' - she looked at Melvin again when



I reminded her of friends, so I tried a different direction - 'and Charlie needs me. He is just all alone up there, and he cannot cook at all.' You want to stay in McAuley?' she asked, confused. The idea was unimaginable for them. And then her eyes flickered back to Melvin.

'Why?'

'I told you - school, Charlie - ouch!' I shrugged my shoulders. Not a clever idea. Her hands fluttered helplessly over me, trying to find a safe place to knock. She was content with my forehead; it was unbandaged.' 'Lily, honey, you hate McAuley,' she reminded me.' It is not so bad.' She frowned and looked back and forth between Melvin and me, this time deliberately.' Is it this boy?' she whispered. I opened my mouth to lie, but her eyes examined my face, and I knew she would see through it.' He is a part of it,' I admitted. There is no need to admit how large a part is. 'So, did you have the opportunity to talk to Melvin?' I asked.' Yes.'

She hesitated and looked at his completely calm form. 'And I want to talk to you about it.' Uh-oh. 'What about that?' I asked.' This boy is in love with you,' she lamented, keeping her voice low. I think so too,' I confided. And what do you think about him?' She barely hid the angry curiosity in her voice. I sighed and looked away. As much as I loved my mother, this was not a conversation I wanted to have with her. 'I'm pretty crazy about him.' There - that sounded like something a teenager could say

with her first boyfriend.' Well, he seems genuinely nice, and, my goodness, he looks incredibly good, but you are so young, Lily...'

Her voice was uncertain; As far as I could remember, this was the first time since I was eight years old that she almost tried to sound like a parental authority. I recognized the reasonable but firm tone from conversations I had with her about men.' I know that, Mom. Do not worry. It is just a swarm,' I reassured her.' That is right,' she agreed with slight satisfaction. Then she sighed and looked guiltily over her shoulder at the big, round clock on the wall.' Do you have to go?' She bit her lip. 'Deans should call for a while... I did not know you were going to wake up...' No problem, Mom.' I tried to tone down the relief so that she did not hurt her feelings. 'I will not be alone.' I will be back soon. I slept here, you know,' she proudly proclaimed. Oh, mom, you do not have to do that! You can sleep at home - I will never notice.' The vortex of painkillers in my brain made it difficult for me to concentrate even now, even though I had slept for days.' I was too nervous,' she admitted embarrassed.

'There have been some crimes in the neighborhood, and I don't like being there alone.' Crime?' I asked alarmed.' Someone broke into the dance studio around the corner from the house and burned it down - there is nothing left at all! And they left a stolen car right in front of them. Do you remember when you danced there, honey?' I remember.' I trembled

...

and winced.' I can stay, baby, if you need me.' No, Mom, I am going to be fine. Melvin will be with me.' She looked like that might be the reason she wanted to stay. 'I'll be back tonight.' It sounded just like a warning, as it sounded like a promise, and she looked at Melvin again when she said it.' I love you, Mom.' I love you too, Lily. Try to be more careful when you leave, honey, I do not want to lose you.' Melvin's eyes remained closed, but a broad grin flashed across his face. A nurse then came in, busy checking all my tubes and wires. My mother kissed my forehead, patted my hand wrapped in gauze and left. The nurse checked the paper display on my heart monitor.' Do you feel anxious, honey? Your heart rate has become a bit high there.' I am fine,' I assured her.

I will tell your RN that you are awake. She will be there in a minute to see you.' As soon as she closed the door, Melvin was by my side.' You stole a car?' I raised my eyebrows. He smiled, without remorse. 'It was a good car, very fast.' How was your nap?' I asked.' Interesting.' His eyes narrowed.' What?' He looked down as he answered. 'I am surprised. I thought California ... and your mother... well, I thought, that is what you want.' 'But you would be stuck in California all day. You could only come out at night, just like a real vampire.' He almost smiled, but not quite. And then his face was serious. 'I would stay in McAuley, Lily. Or somewhere like that,' he explained. 'Somewhere where I couldn't hurt you anymore.' It

did not settle in at first. I continued to stare at him empty as the words snapped into my head one by one like a horrible puzzle. I was barely aware of the sound of my accelerating heart, although when my breathing became hyperventilation, I was aware of the sharp pain in my protesting ribs. He said nothing; He watched my face suspiciously as the pain, which had nothing to do with broken bones, pain infinitely worse, threatened to crush me. And then another nurse came into the room purposefully.

Melvin sat still as stone as she recorded my expression with a trained eye before turning to the monitors.' Time for more painkillers, honey?' she asked kindly and tapped on the IV food.' No, no,' I murmured, trying to keep the agony out of my voice. 'I don't need anything.' I could not afford to close my eyes now.' No need to be brave, honey. It is better if you are not too stressed; you must rest.' She waited, but I just shook my head.' Okay,' she sighed. 'Press the call button when you're ready.' She gave Melvin a stern look and took an anxious look at the machinery before she left. His cool hands were on my face; I stared at him with wild eyes.' Shah, Lily, calm down.' Do not leave me,' I pleaded in a broken voice.' I will not do it,' he promised. 'Now relax before I call the nurse back to sedate you.' But my heart could not slow down.' Lily.' He stroked my face anxiously. 'I am not going anywhere. I will be here if you need me.' Do you swear you will not leave me?' I whispered. I tried to at least control

the wheezing. My ribs were throbbing. He put his hands on both sides of my face and brought his face close to mine. His eyes were wide and serious. 'I swear.' The smell of his breath was soothing.

It relieved the pain of my breathing. He continued to hold my gaze as my body slowly relaxed and the beeping returned to a normal pace. His eyes were dark, now closer to black than to gold.' Better?' he asked.' Yes,' I said cautiously. He shook his head and mumbled something incomprehensible. I thought I had picked out the word 'overreaction.' Why did you say that?' I whispered and tried not to make my voice tremble. 'Are you tired of having to save me all the time? Do you want me to leave?' No, I do not want to be without you, Lily, of course not. Be rational. And I have no problem saving you either - if it were not for the fact that I would be the one who put you in danger... that I am the reason you are here.' Yes, you are the reason.' I frowned. 'The reason I'm here - alive.' Hardly.' His voice was just a whisper. 'Covered with gauze and plaster and barely able to move.' I was not referring to my recent near-death experience,' I said, becoming increasingly irritated. 'I thought of the others - you can make your choice. If it were not for you, I would rot in the cemetery of McAuley.'

He winced at my words, but the enchanted look did not leave his eyes.' But that is not the worst,' he whispered. He pretended I had not

spoken. 'I don't see you there on the floor... crumpled and broken.' His voice was suffocating. 'I did not think I was late. Not even hearing you scream in pain, all those unbearable memories I will carry with me for the rest of eternity. No, the worst thing was the feeling... knowing that I could not stop. I think I would kill you myself.' But you did not.' I could have done it. It is that simple.' I knew I had to stay calm... But he tried to persuade himself to leave me, and the panic fluttered in my lungs and tried to get out.'

Promise me,' I whispered. What?' You know what.' I started getting angry now. He was so stubbornly determined to deal with the negative. He heard the change in my tone. His eyes contracted. 'I don't seem strong enough to stay away from you, so I assume you'll get your way... whether it kills you or not,' he added roughly. Good.' However, he had not promised it — a fact I had not missed. The panic hardly held back; I no longer had the strength to control the anger. 'You told me how you stopped... now I want to know why,' I demanded. Why?' he repeated suspiciously.' Why you did it. Why didn't you just let the poison spread? By now, I would be just like you.' Melvin's eyes turned flat black, and I remembered that this was something he had never intended, that I knew. Naddalin Natalie must have dealt with the things she had learned about herself... Or she had been incredibly careful with her thoughts around him

- obviously, he had no idea that she had informed me about the mechanics of vampire conversions. He was surprised and angry. His nostrils flickered; his mouth looked as if he was carved out of stone. He did not want to answer, that much was clear.' I will be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships,' I said. 'But it just seems logical... A man and a woman must be equal... As in, one of them cannot always rush in and save the other.

They must save each other equally.' He crossed his arms on the side of my bed and put his chin on his arms. His facial expression was smooth, the anger restrained. Obviously, he had decided that he would not be angry with me. I hoped I would get a chance to warn Naddalin Natalie before he caught up with her.' You saved me,' he said softly. I cannot always be Joyce Dunn,' I insisted. 'I also want to be Superman.' You do not know what you are asking.' His voice was soft; He stared attentively at the edge of the pillowcase.' I do.' Lily, you do not know. I have had almost ninety years to think about it, and I am still not sure.' Do you wish Melchor had not saved you?' No, I do not want that.' He paused before moving on. 'But my life was over. I did not give up anything.' You are my life. You are the only thing that would hurt me to lose.' I got better and better at it. It was easy to admit how much I needed him. However, he was

very calm. Decided.' I cannot, Lily. I am not going to do that to you.' Why not?'

My throat was clearing, and the words were not as loud as I had meant. 'Don't tell me it is too hard! After today, or it was a few days ago... Anyway, after that it should not be anything.' He stared at me.' And the pain?' he asked. I blanched. I could not help it. But I tried to stop my expression from showing how clearly, I remembered the feeling... the fire in my veins.' 'That is my problem,' I said. 'I can handle it.' It is possible to bring courage to the point where he becomes insane.' It is not a problem. Three days. Big deal.' Melvin grimaced again when my words reminded him that I was more informed than he had ever intended. I watched as he suppressed anger, watched his eyes become speculative.' 'Charlie?' he asked succinctly. Minutes passed in silence as I tried to answer his question. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. I closed it again. He waited, and his expression triumphed because he knew I had no true answer.'

Look, that is not a problem either,' I finally murmured; my voice was as unconvincing as ever when I lied. 'Rameauite has always made the decisions that work for her - she wants me to do the same. And Charlie is resilient, he is used to being alone. I cannot take care of them forever. I have my own life to live.' Exactly,' he snapped. 'And I'm not



going to finish it for you.' If you are waiting for me to lie on my deathbed, I have news for you! I was just there!' You will recover,' he reminded me. I took a deep breath to calm down, ignoring the pain spasm it was triggering. I stared at him, and he stared back. There was no compromise in his face.' No,' I said slowly. 'I'm not.' His forehead wrinkled. 'Of course, you are. You may have one or two scars... 'You're wrong,' I insisted. 'I will die.' Really, Lily.' He was anxious now. 'You'll be out of here in a few days. A maximum of two weeks.' I stared at him, 'I may not die now... but I will die at some point. Every minute of the day I get closer. And I am getting old.' He frowned as what I said sank, pressed his long fingers to his temples and closed his eyes. 'That's how it is supposed to happen. How it should happen. How would it have happened if I had not existed - and I should not exist.' I snorted.

He opened his eyes in surprise. 'That's stupid. It is like going to someone who just won the lottery, taking their money and saying, 'Look, let us just go back to how things should be. It is better that way.' And I did not buy it.' I am hardly a lottery win,' he growled. That is right. You are much better.' He rolled his eyes and fixed his lips. 'Lily, we do not have this discussion anymore. I refuse to condemn you to an eternity of the night, and that is the end of it.' If you think that is the end, then you do not know me very well,' I warned him. 'You're not the only vampire I

know.' His eyes turned black again. 'Naddalin Natalie wouldn't dare.' And for a moment it looked so scary that I could not help but believe it - I could not imagine anyone brave enough to cross it.' Naddalin Natalie has seen it before, hasn't she?' I guessed. 'That's why the things she says upset you. She knows that I will be like you... at some point.' She is wrong. She also saw you dead, but that did not happen either.' You will never catch me betting against Naddalin Natalie.' We stared at each other for an exceptionally long time. It was quiet except for the whirring of the machines, the beeping, the dripping, the ticking of the big clock on the wall. Eventually, his facial expression became softer.' Where does this lead us?' I wondered. He giggled humorlessly. 'I think it's called a dead end.' I sighed. 'Ouch,' I murmured. 'How do you feel?' he asked, eyeing the button for the nurse. 'I am fine,' I lied. 'I do not believe you,' he said softly. 'I am not going back to sleep.' You need rest. All this arguing is not good for you.' So, give in,' I indicated. 'Nice try.' He reached for the button. 'No!' He ignored me. 'Yes?'

Screeched the loudspeaker on the wall. 'We are ready for more painkillers,' he said calmly, ignoring my angry expression. I am going to send the nurse.' The voice sounded very boring. 'I will not take it,' I promised. He looked at the bag of liquids hanging next to my bed. 'I don't think they're going to ask you to swallow anything.' My heart rate started

to rise. He read the fear in my eyes and sighed in frustration.' Lily, you are in pain. You need to relax so that you can heal. Why are you so difficult? They are not going to put needles in you now.' I am not afraid of needles,' I murmured. 'I'm afraid to close my eyes.' Then he smiled his crooked smile and took my face between his hands. 'I told you I am not going anywhere. Do not be afraid. If it makes you happy, I will be here.' I smiled back and ignored the pain in my cheeks. 'You talk about eternity, you know.' Oh, you are going to get over it - it is just a swarm.' I shook my head in disbelief - it made me dizzy. 'I was shocked when I swallowed that. I know you know better.' That is the beauty of being human,' he told me.

'Things are changing.' My eyes narrowed. 'Don't hold your breath.' He laughed when the nurse came in and a syringe was swinging. 'Excuse me,' she said brusquely to Edwardes got up and walked to the end of the small room, leaning against the wall. He crossed his arms and waited. I kept an eye on him, still worried. He met my gaze calmly.' Let us go, honey.' The nurse smiled as she injected the medication into my tube. 'You're going to feel better now.' Thank you,' I murmured unabashedly. It did not take long. I could feel the drowsiness trickle through my bloodstream instantly.' It should,' she murmured as my eyelids hung down. She must have left the room because something cold and smooth touched

my face.' Stay.' The word was washed out.' I will,' he promised. His voice was beautiful, like a lullaby. 'As I said, as long as it makes you happy... as long as it's best for you.' I tried to shake my head, but it was too hard. 'It's not the same,' I murmured. He laughed. 'Don't worry now, Lily. You can argue with me when you wake up.' I smiled. 'Kay.' I could feel his lips on my ear.'

I love you,' he whispered. Me too.' I know,' he laughed softly. I turned my head slightly... Search. He knew what I was all about. His lips touched mine gently.' Thank you,' I sighed.' Anytime.' I was not there anymore. But I fought weakly against the Stupor. There was only one thing I wanted to tell him.' Eduard?' I struggled to pronounce his name clearly.' Yes?' I bet on Naddalin Natalie,' I murmured. EPILOG: AN OCCASIONALLY helped me into his car, being incredibly careful with the hint of silk and chiffon, the flowers he had just put into my intricately styled curls, and my bulky walking cast. He ignored the angry sentence of my mouth. When he calmed me down, he sat down in the driver's seat and drove back on the long, narrow ride.' At what point exactly are you going to tell me what is going on?' I asked grumpily. I really hated surprises. And he knew that.' I am shocked you have not figured it out yet.' He threw a mocking smile in my direction, and my breath stuck in my throat. Would I ever get used to his perfection?' I mentioned that you look genuinely

nice, don't you?' I checked it out.' Yes.' He grinned again. I had never seen him dressed in black before, and in contrast to his pale skin, his beauty was surreal.

I could not deny that much, even though the fact that he was wearing a tuxedo made me extremely nervous. Not as nervous as the dress. Or the shoe. Only a shoe, as my other foot was still securely covered with plaster. But the stiletto heel, held only by satin ribbons, certainly would not help me when I tried to limp around.' I cannot stop when Naddalin Natalie treats me like guinea pig Barbie when I do,' I said angrily. I had spent most of the day in Naddalin Natalie's stunningly large bathroom, a helpless victim when she played hairdresser and beautician. Whenever I fidgeted or complained, she reminded me that she had no memories of being human and asked me not to ruin her vicarious fun. Then she had dressed me in the most ridiculous dress - deep blue, ruffled and off the shoulders, with French tags I could not read - a dress that was better suited for a catwalk than McAuley. Nothing good could come of our formal attire, I was sure. Unless... but I was afraid to put my suspicions into words, even in my own head. I was then distracted by the sound of a phone ringing. Melvin pulled his cell phone out of a pocket in his jacket and looked briefly at the caller ID before answering.' Hello, Charlie,' he said cautiously.' Charlie?'

I frowned. Charlie was... difficult since my return to McAuley. He had divided my terrible experience into two defined reactions. To Melchor, he was almost worthy of worship. On the other hand, he was stubbornly convinced that Melvin was to blame - because without him I would not have left my home in the first place. And Melvin was far from agreeing with him. Back then, I had rules that had not existed before: curfews... Visiting hours. Something Charlie said made Melvin's eyes widen in disbelief, and then a grin spread across his face.' You are kidding!' He laughed.' What is it?' I demanded. He ignored me. 'Why don't you let me talk to him?' Melvin suggested with obvious joy. He waited a few seconds.' Hi, Tyler, this is Melvin Shezor.' His voice was very friendly on the surface. I knew it well enough to grasp the soft edge of the threat. What did Tyler do at my home? The terrible truth began to dawn on me. I looked again at the inappropriate dress Naddalin Natalie had forced me into.' I am sorry if there was a misunderstanding, but Lily is not available tonight.' Melvin's tone changed, and the threat in his voice suddenly became much clearer as he continued. 'To be completely honest, it will not be available every night, which concerns anyone but me. Nothing bad.'

-And-

'I'm sorry for your evening.'

He did not sound sad at all. And then he snapped the phone, a huge grin on his face. My face and neck reddened with rage in crimson. I could feel the angry tears beginning to fill my eyes. He looked at me in surprise. 'Was the last part a bit too much? I did not want to offend you.' I ignored that. 'You take me to the prom!'

I screamed. It was now embarrassingly obvious. If I had been paying attention at all, I am sure I would have noticed the date on the posters that adorned the school buildings. But I never dreamed that he would think of submitting to it. Didn't he know me at all? He had not expected the force of my reaction, that was clear. He squeezed his lips and his eyes narrowed.

'Don't be difficult, Lily.' My eyes flashed to the window; We were already halfway to school.' Why are you doing this to me?' I asked in horror. He pointed to his tuxedo. 'Honestly, Lily, what do you think we're doing?' I was ashamed. First, because I had overlooked the obvious. And because the vague suspicions — real expectations — that I had formed all day when Naddalin Natalie was trying to turn me into a beauty contest winner went so far beyond the mark.

My half-anxious hopes now seemed very stupid. I had suspected that there was an opportunity to get together. But prom! That was the worst thing that came to mind. Angry tears rolled down my

cheeks. I remembered with dismay that I was wearing mascara very atypically. I quickly wiped my eyes to avoid stains. My hand was unredacted when I pulled it away; Naddalin Natalie had known I needed waterproof makeup.' This is completely ridiculous. Why are you crying?' he asked in frustration.' Because I am mad!' Lily.'

He directed the full power of his glowing golden eyes at me.' What?' I murmured, distracted.' Humor me,' he emphasized. His eyes melted all my anger. It was impossible to fight with him when he cheated like that. I gave in with poor grace.' Good,' I pouted, unable to dazzle as effectively as I would have liked. 'I will go quietly. But you will see. I am long overdue for more bad luck. I will break my other leg. Check out this shoe! It is a death trap!' I stretched out my good leg as proof.' Hmmm.' He stared at my leg longer than necessary. 'Remind me to thank Naddalin Natalie for that tonight.' Naddalin Natalie will be there?' That comforted me a little.' With Jae and Dejen... and Vivian,' he admitted. The feeling of comfort disappeared.

There had been no progress with Vivian, although I had a good relationship with her sometimes husband. Dejen enjoyed having me around me - he found my bizarre human reactions hilarious... or it was just the fact he found so funny. Vivian pretended I did not exist. As I shook my head to disperse the direction my thoughts had gone, I thought of



something else.' Is Charlie there?' I asked, suddenly suspicious. 'Of course.'

He grinned and then laughed. 'Apparently, Tyler wasn't.' I gritted my teeth. How Tyler could be so delusional, I could not imagine. At school, where Charlie could not interfere, Melvin and I were inseparable - apart from those rare sunny days. We were now in school; Vivian's red convertible stood out in the parking lot. The clouds were thin today, a few strips of sun escaped far away in the Westenberg got out and walked around the car to open my door.

He stretched out his hand. I sat stubbornly in my seat, my arms crossed, and felt a secret hint of complacency. The lot was crowded with people in formal attire: witnesses. He could not forcibly remove me from the car like he could have done if we had been alone. He sighed. 'If someone wants to kill you, you're brave like a lion - and then when someone mentions dancing...' He shook his head. I swallowed.

Dancing.' Lily, I do not let anything hurt me - not even by yourself. I will not let you go once; I promise.' I thought about it and suddenly felt much better. He could see it in my face.' There, now,' he said gently, 'it won't be so bad.' He bent down and wrapped an arm around my waist. I took his other hand and let him lift me out of the car. He held his arm tightly around me and supported me as I limped towards school. In

Phoenix, they held proms in hotel ballrooms. This dance was, of course, in the gym. It was the only room in the city that was big enough for a dance. When we got in, I giggled. There were balloon arches and twisted garlands of pastel crepe paper that adorned the walls.'

It looks like a horror movie waiting to happen,' I nodded.

Well,' he murmured as we slowly approached the ticket table — he was carrying most of my weight, but I still had to shuffle and wiggle my feet forward — 'there are more than enough vampires present.' I looked at the dance floor; A large gap had formed in the middle of the floor, in which two pairs whirled gracefully.

The other dancers pressed themselves to the sides of the room to give them space - no one wanted to stand in opposition to such charisma. Dejen and Jae were intimidating and flawless in classic tuxedos. Naddalin Natalie stood out in a black satin dress with geometric necklines that exposed large triangles of her snow-white skin. And Vivian was... well, Vivian. She was amazing. Her vibrant scarlet dress was backless, tight on her calves, where it flared up into a wide ruffled train, with a neckline that dropped to her waist. I felt sorry for every girl in the room, myself included.'

Do you want me to lock the doors so you can massacre the unsuspecting city dwellers?' I whispered conspiratorially.' And where do

you fit into this scheme?' He grinned. 'Oh, I am with the vampires, of course.' He smiled reluctantly. 'Everything you can get out of dancing.' Everything.' He bought our tickets and then turned me onto the dance floor. I shrugged his arm and pulled my feet. 'I have the whole night,' he warned. Eventually, he dragged me to where his family whirled elegantly- albeit in a style that was completely unsuitable for today's times and music. I watched in horror.' Melvin.'

My throat was so dry that I could only handle a whisper. 'I honestly can't dance!' I could feel the panic bubbling in my chest. 'Do not worry, silly,' he whispered back. 'I can.'

He put my arms around his neck and lifted me up to slide his feet under mine. And then we also whirled. 'I feel like I am five years old,' I laughed after a few minutes of effortless waltzing. 'You do not look five,' he murmured and pulled me closer for a second, so my feet were briefly one foot above the ground. Naddalin Natalie caught my eye during a spin and smiled encouraged - I smiled back. I was surprised to realize that I was enjoying myself... a little bit. 'Okay, that is not half as bad,' I admitted. But Melvin stared at the doors, and his face was furious. 'What is it?' I wondered loudly. I followed his gaze, disoriented by spinning, but eventually, I could see what bothered him. Chiaz Naztherth, not in a tuxedo, but in a long-sleeved white shirt and tie, his hair smoothed back to

his usual ponytail, crossed the ground to us. After the initial shock of recognition, I could not help but feel sorry for Chiaz. He clearly felt uncomfortable - excruciating.

His face apologized when his eyes hit mine. Melvin growled very quietly.' Behave!' I hissed. Melvin's voice was devastating. 'He wants to chat with you.' Chiaz then reached us; the embarrassment and apology were even clearer in his face.' Hey, Lily, I was hoping you would be here.' Chiaz sounded as if he had hoped for exactly the opposite. But his smile was as warm as ever.' Hello Chiaz.' I smiled back. 'What's going on?' Can I cut in?' he asked tentatively, looking at Melvin for the first time. I was shocked when I realized that Chiaz did not have to look up. He must have grown half a foot since the first time I saw him. Melvin's face was composed, his facial expression empty. His only answer was to carefully get on my feet and take a step back.' Thank you,' Chiaz said kindly. Melvin just nodded and looked at me attentively before turning around to leave. Chiaz put his hands on my waist, and I reached up to put my hands on his shoulders.' Wow, Jake, how tall are you now?' He was complacent.

'Six-two.' We did not really dance - my leg made that impossible. Instead, we awkwardly swayed from side to side without moving our feet. It was just as good; The recent growth spurt had made him look gaiety and uncoordinated, he was not a better dancer than me.'

So, how did you end up here tonight?' I asked without any real curiosity. Given Melvin's reaction, I could guess.' Can you believe that my father paid me twenty dollars to get to your prom?' he admitted slightly ashamedly.' "Yes, I can,' I murmured. 'Well, I hope you are at least having fun. Have you seen something you like?' I teased myself and nodded to a group of girls lined up on the wall like pastel-colored confections.' Yes,' he sighed. 'But it is taken.' He looked down to meet my curious eye for just a second - then we both looked away embarrassed.' You look pretty ' he added shyly. Um, thank you. Why did Billy pay you to come here?'

I asked quickly, even though I knew the answer. Jakob did not seem to be grateful for the change of subject; He looked away, uncomfortable again. 'He said it was a 'safe' place to talk to you. I swear the old man loses his mind.' I joined his laughter weakly.' Anyway, he said if I told you something, he would get me the primary cylinder I needed,' he confessed with an embarrassed grin. Then tell me. I want you to finish your car.' I grinned back. At least Chiaz did not believe anything about it. It made the situation a little easier. On the wall, Melvin looked at my face, his own face expressionless. I saw a second grader in a pink dress looking at him with shy speculation, but he seemed unaware of them. Chiaz looked away in shame. 'Don't get angry, okay?'

There is no way I will be angry with you, Chiaz,' I assured him. 'I am not even going to be mad at Billy. Just say what you need to do.' Well, this is so stupid, I am sorry, Lily - he wants you to break up with your boyfriend. He asked me to tell you 'Please.' 'He shook his head in disgust.' He is still superstitious, isn't he?' He was... somehow exaggerated when you hurt yourself in Phoenix. He did not believe...'Chiaz ran away confidently. My eyes narrowed. 'I fell.' I know that' Jakob said quickly. He thinks Melvin had something to do with the fact that I was hurt.'

There was no question about it, and despite my promise, I was angry. Chiaz would not meet my eyes. We did not even bother to sway to the music, even though his hands were still on my waist and mine around his neck.' Look, Chiaz, I know Billy will not believe this, but just so you know' - he looked at me now and reacted to the new seriousness in my voice - 'Melvin really saved my life. If it were not for Melvin and his father, I would be dead.' I know,' he claimed, but he sounded like my sincere words had influenced him a bit. He could at least convince Billy of so much.' Hey, I am sorry you had to come to do that, Chiaz,' I apologized. 'Definitely you get your parts, don't you?' Yes,' he murmured. He still looked awkward... angry.' Is there more?' I asked in disbelief.' Forget it,' he murmured, 'I'll get a job and save the money myself.' I stared at him until he met my gaze. 'Just spit it out, Chiaz.' It is so bad.' I do not care.

Tell me,' I insisted.' Ok... But, geez, that sounds bad.' He shook his head. 'He said, to tell you, no, to warn you that - and this is his plural, not mine' - he raised a hand from my waist and made small quotation marks in the air - 'We're going to watch.' He watched my reaction cautiously.

It sounded like something out of a mafia movie. I laughed aloud.' I am sorry you had to do that, Jake,' I nodded.' I do not mind that much.' He grinned relieved. His eyes were appreciative as they quickly raked over my dress. 'So, shall I tell him that you told him to throw the hell out?' he hopefully asked. No,' I sighed. 'Tell him that I said thank you. I know he means well.' The song ended, and I dropped my arms. His hands hesitated at my waist, and he looked at my hind leg. 'Do you want to dance again? Or can I help you get somewhere?' Melvin answered me. 'That's fine, Chiaz. I am going to take it from here.' Chiaz winced and stared at Melvin with big eyes, who was standing right next to us.' Hey, I did not see you there,' he murmured. 'I think we'll see you, Lily.'

He took a step back and waved half-heartedly. I smiled. 'Yes, we'll see you later.' I am sorry,' he said again before turning to the door. Melvin's arms wrapped around me when the next song began. It was a little up-tempo for slow dancing, but that did not seem to worry him. I leaned my head contentedly against his chest.' Feeling better?' I teased.' Not really,' he said succinctly.' Do not be mad at Billy,' I sighed. 'He's only

worried about me for Charlie's sake. It is nothing personal.' I am not mad at Billy,' he corrected in a truncated voice.

'But his son irritates me.' I withdrew to look at him. His face was profoundly serious.' Why?' First, he made me break my promise.' I stared at him in confusion. He smiled half. 'I promised that I wouldn't let you go tonight,' he explained. Oh. Well, I forgive you.' Thank you. But there is something else.' Melvin frowned. I waited patiently.' He called you pretty,' he finally continued, his frown deepening. 'This is an insult, the way you look right now. You are much more than beautiful.' I laughed. 'You might be a little biased.' I do not think it was. I also have excellent eyesight.' We whirled again, my feet on his, as he held me.' So, are you going to explain the reason for all this?' I wondered. He looked down on me confused and I stared meaningfully at the crepe paper. He thought for a moment, then changed direction and turned me through the crowd to the back door of the gym. I caught a glimpse of Charity-Anna and Buddy dancing and staring at me curiously. Charity-Anna waved, and I quickly smiled back. Jeannette was also there, looking happy in the arms of little Chiaz Naztherth; She did not look up from his eyes, a head lower than hers. Dee and Rebeca, Emily, stared at us, with Joseph Shaw; I could name any face that passed me by. And then we were outside, in the cool, dim light of a fading sunset.



As soon as we were alone, he swung me into his arms and carried me across the dark terrain until he reached the bench in the shade of the Madron trees. He sat there holding me by his chest. The moon had already risen, visible through the wafer-thin clouds, and his face shone pale in white light. His mouth was hard, his eyes worried.' The point?' I quietly requested. He ignored me and stared up at the moon.'

Wild in the Moonlight at Twilight again,' he murmured. 'Another end. No matter how perfect the day is, it must always end.' Some things do not have to end,' I murmured through my teeth, immediately tense. He sighed.' I took you to prom,' he said slowly, finally answering my question, 'because I do not want you to miss anything. I do not want my presence to take anything away from you if I can help her. I want you to be a human being. I want your life to continue as it would have been if I had died in nineteen-eighteen as I should have.' I shuddered at his words and then shook my head angrily. 'In what strange parallel dimension would I ever have voluntarily gone to prom? If you were not a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with it.'

He smiled briefly, but it did not touch his eyes. 'It wasn't so bad, you said that yourself.' That is because I was with you.' We remained silent for a minute; he stared at the moon, and I stared at him. I wish there were a way to explain how much I was interested in a normal human life.'

Do you want to tell me something?' he asked, looking down at me with a slight smile.' Shouldn't I always?' Just promise me that you will tell me, 'He insisted with a grin. I knew I would regret it almost immediately. 'Good.' You seemed honestly surprised when you found out I was bringing you here,' he began. I was,' I interjected.' Exactly,' he agreed. 'But you must have had a different theory... I am curious - what did you think I dressed you up for?' Yes, immediate regret. I pursed my lips and hesitated. 'I don't want to tell you.' You promised,' he disagreed. I know.' What is the problem?' I knew he thought it was just an embarrassment that held me back. 'I think it's going to make you angry or sad.'

His brows contracted over his eyes as he thought about it. 'I still want to know. Please?' I sighed. He waited.' Well... I assumed it was a kind of... Opportunity. But I did not think it would be some hackneyed human thing... Prom!' I scoffed.' Man?' he asked flatly. He had picked up the key word. I looked down on my dress and fidgeted with a stray piece of chiffon. He waited in silence.' Okay,' I confessed in a hurry. 'So, I was hoping you had changed your mind... that you would change me.' A dozen emotions played over his face. Some I recognized: anger... Pain... and then he seemed to gather, and his expression was amused.' You thought it was a black-tie occasion, didn't you?'

he teased, touching the lapel of his tuxedo jacket. I ducked to hide my embarrassment. 'I do not know how these things work. At least for me, it seems more rational than prom.' He was still grinning. 'It's not funny,' I said. No, you are right, it is not,' he agreed, his smile faded. 'However, I'd rather treat it like a joke than believe you're serious.' But I am serious.' He sighed deeply. 'I know. And you are really that willing?' The pain was back in his eyes. I bit my lip and nodded.'

So ready that this will be the end,' he almost murmured, 'that this will be the twilight of your life, even though your life has barely begun. You are ready to give up everything.' It is not the end, it is the beginning,' I said under my breath. I am not worth it,' he said sadly.

Do you remember when you told me that I do not see myself very clearly?' I asked and raised my eyebrows. 'You obviously have the same blindness.' I know what I am.' I sighed. But his strange mood shifted to me. He pursed his lips and his eyes probed.

He examined my face for a long moment.' So, you are ready now?' he asked. 'Um.' I swallowed. 'Yes?' He smiled and slowly tilted his head until his cold lips stroked against the skin just below the angle of his jaw. 'Right now?' He whispered, his breath blowing coolly around my throat. I trembled involuntarily.'

Yes,' I whispered so that my voice had no chance of breaking. If he thought I was bluffing, he would be disappointed. I had already made this decision, and I was sure. It did not matter that my body was rigid like a board, my hands clenched into fists, my breathing was irregular... He giggled darkly and leaned away. His face looked disappointed.' You cannot really believe that I would give in so easily,' he said with an acidic edge to his mocking tone. A girl can dream.'

His eyebrows raised. 'Is that what you dream of? To be a monster?' Not quite,' I said, frowning at his choice of words. Monsters, indeed. 'Most of the time I dream of being with you forever.' His facial expression changed, softened, and saddened by the subtle pain in my voice.' Lily.' His fingers slightly traced the shape of my lips.

'I'll stay with you - isn't that enough?' I smiled under his fingertips. 'Enough for the action.' He frowned at my tenacity. No one would surrender tonight. He execrated, and the sound was a growl. I touched his face. 'Look,' I said. 'I love you more than anything else in the world combined. Isn't that enough?' Yes, it is enough,' he replied with a smile. 'Enough forever.' And he bent down to press his cold lips to my neck again.